



Learning the other world is not another world



Daily life of a woman in the Himalayas

PHOTO: SHARON WYNN

BY MIRIAM KORN

Just before I left for India, I had a long conversation about feminism with an anthropologist friend. When I condemned sati, the once widespread practice of having a widow jump into her late husband's funeral fire, I was accused of being insensitive and ignoring the situation in the context of the country's culture and religion.

Thus, upon my departure, I decided I would put feminism aside for awhile, in an effort to remain objective. I would wear long sleeves and skirts. I would "respect" their culture.

As my visit progressed, however, I recalled the ideals I learned from feminism over and over again in order to deal with various situations. My beliefs were not only reinforced, but intensified.

I soon discovered that India has one of the strongest, most highly organized and integrated feminist movements in the world. Many of the women were well versed in feminist philosophy and very aware of the disadvantaged position women had in their country as well as around the world.

"Most women do not recognise their oppression," said Vasantha, an Indian woman with her pre-doctorate in Women's Studies.

Many of the situations Vasantha described as part of her middle-class life rang of familiarity. "It's the same

in the West," my European companions and I would often comment.

The difference is that Indian feminist academics remain very involved at the grass roots level, explained Helen Ralston, a sociology professor at St. Mary's University. Educated women are very active in social programs helping people of villages. Their embracement of theory becomes a basis for action.

They fight for the abolition of the dowry system and sati. An emphasis is put on promoting the value of women in society, in turn, demanding rights to better food, clothing and education for women. They have made progress, for there are laws concerning these issues, but their implementation is lax.

Also, in India, family issues are basically covered by one's religious law, thus further adding to the complexity of the situation.

The oppression of women has no basis in the country's most prevalent religion, Hinduism, according to Dr. Ravindra of Dalhousie's comparative religion department.

In fact, some feel that religion is simply used as a false justification of oppression, said Ralston.

During a typical Indian woman's life, she is under the control of various men: first, her father and brothers, then, her husband and in-laws and finally, even her sons. The crux of the problem is from the moment of conception, a female child is seen as a bride-to-be, later given away to another man's family. A son is a future provider. A daughter is a burden.

Nevertheless, many women have managed to break out of their traditional roles and speak out. One man asked the editor of *Manushi*, India's "Journal about women and society", if Indian women had role models parallel to those that many Indian men idealized, such as the Marlboro man.

"No," she replied, "Indian women are not so stupid."

For me, it was hard to leave India without a general feeling of admiration for the women and a certain degree of disgust for the men.

In both small tribal villages and the slums of large cities, one witnessed sari-clad women working, fetching water, cooking food, washing clothes, tilling fields and caring for children.

By the end of my stay, I became enraged and literally sickened each time I saw groups of men sitting, smoking, and drinking . . . hanging around.

I was infuriated knowing that each of them had mothers, wives and daughters working at home, who were completely unappreciated. Furthermore, these women often went outside the home to earn extra money for the household, while most men spent the majority of their money on cigarettes, alcohol and movies. It was painfully ironic that this was all due to the fact that men were the

privileged class.

"How do you like Indians?"

"The women are very strong, and very beautiful," I would reply to this frequent question.

As I gazed outside a rickety Indian bus window, over and over again, I would think, "This country is fucked."

Sometimes India's situation seemed so complex and so hopeless, that it was absolutely overwhelming. It sent my head spinning trying to

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figure out the crux of all the problems I saw before me and how they related to the problems that existed at home in the West. As feminist philosophy repeatedly cropped up, I asked myself, "But how can that help save the world?"

Now, I realize that feminism is a foundation for addressing the multitude of issues I encountered during my visit. Feminism is not just a matter of fighting for women's right to equality with men, it is a basic recognition and analysis of oppression which is the first step to overcoming it. The problem is there are many interpretations of the meaning of feminism and, in the West, it is still dominated by white, young, educated, heterosexual middle-class women.

It seems appropriate that this question was taken up in *The Gazette* office, home of a publication meant to give students a voice, as long as it is not sexist, racist, or homophobic.

After reading stories by various women about the exploitation of the Earth, discrimination on the basis of race and the distinctions between getting old as a woman and getting old as a man, a discussion was sparked. Things began coming together.

The problems we face are due to intrinsic shortcomings in our thinking: the labelling of human beings (the "us and them" syndrome) and a lack of recognition of holism, the concept which says our universe is interconnected.

Feminism embraces this ideology. Hence, it is a crucial step in developing a philosophy for the reform of society. The ultimate goal should be giving dignity to everyone and everything in our world.

Ecology of humanity

BY JOANNE FRY

National Sea Products Ltd. was recently accused of major CFC leaks estimated at 20 tonnes a year. It appears that the financial expense involved in repairing or replacing the faulty CFC refrigerant system seemed a larger cost to bear than the environmental damage that could result by not correcting the situation.

Want to know my first reaction to such news? Anger. Anger because it

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would take a hell of a lot of aerosol cans to release an equivalent amount of CFCs.

I am angry that Nat Sea could knowingly allow huge CFC leakages at a time when consumers are mak-

ing responsible product choices and living by the guideline 'reduce, reuse and recycle.' Such an action seems blatantly arrogant. Arrogant but not surprising when considered within the context of our present society which thrives upon exploitation of the environment, animals and even other humans.

"Rape, war, bigotry, poverty, clear-cutting, toxic dumping, pigeon shoots, factory farming, and animal testing can all be attributed to a common source: disregard and contempt for the integrity, rights, and feelings of all that is not human - and much of that which is.

If asked to define the nature of that common source . . . [f]or myself and many feminists within the movement, it's patriarchal culture with its values based on hierarchy, exploitation, and conquest."

- Dana Forbes

It was not until reading Dana Forbes' article in the January/February issue of *Ms.* that I began to clearly understand the connection between the exploitation of animals, the environment and the issues which face women in today's society.

If one accepts that hierarchy, exploitation and conquest are at the root of our culture, I don't believe

that it is possible to be a feminist without being an environmentalist. Thus, ecofeminism seems a more holistic approach for women working to change society.

The declaration of being ecofeminist allows women to redefine feminism. It is refusing to allow middle class, educated, white women to share the top of the hierarchical pyramid with white men. Refusing to allow any human access to a position where they would have the opportunity to exploit others, humans or non-humans, on the basis of power. Ecofeminism is an acceptance that a just society cannot be created until all humans, animals and environments are treated with respect, including the ozone layer.

