



Rashtra Mahila

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Editor's Column

The recent incident of *sati* at the Cheehar village in Raipur district of Chhattisgarh is illustrative of the superstitious and retrograde mindset that rules the roost in the remote rural areas of India.

75 year old Lalmati recently jumped onto her husband's pyre after all the villagers had left the site on the bank at the confluence of two rivers-Mahanadi and Shivrath.

Dressed in a bridal sari, before committing self-immolation, she made a couple of rounds of the pyre, holding a coconut and a copy of Ramayana.

As the news of her committing *sati* spread, people carrying coconut, sweets and incense sticks began flocking to the site.

Meanwhile, seven people in her immediate family have been arrested for the grievous crime of *sati*-abetment; her daughter, her three sons and their wives. The police, no doubt, did the right thing in sending out a strong message that motivation and glorification of *sati* is a crime under the Commission of Sati (prevention)

FOCUS SATI

Act, 1987. But the entire village is surely culpable of supporting the commission of *sati*. These people actually believed that *sati* was a deed of great piety and merit, worthy of social support.

Lalmati's immolation clearly indicated how entrenched medieval social customs are in India, where modernity floats only on the surface. Such mindset of Indian

people can only be eradicated with education and awareness-education not in a literal sense but that education which can work as a tool for social transformation, where knowledge instils understanding, which in turn, helps people to shun age-old cultural beliefs that there is spiritual reward for a human being who burns herself alive.

But it is also true, without society's active support, no evil custom can be completely eradicated. Laws alone cannot lead to social transformation unless followed by resolute action and transformed social behavior. There should be a revolution of consciousness in the minds of women-in the way they think about themselves and also in the minds of men in the way they look at women and themselves.

NCW's draft Bill for victims of acid attacks

National Commission for Women has prepared a Draft Bill for the Victims of Acid Attacks titled Prevention of offences (by Acids) Act 2008". Acid attacks could be termed as an act of gender based violence that results in, or likely to result in physical, sexual psychological harm or suffering to women. The medical treatment is a costly affair and very often the victim is left to fend for herself, with nobody to provide support. At present, there is no provision for providing compensation to them. Such cases are registered under section 320 & 326 of IPC that is grievous hurt, while, actually it is much more than that since it causes permanent and severe damage to various parts of the body.

The proposed law aims to achieve the following objectives :

1. Classification of acid attack as a separate and most heinous form of offence under IPC.
2. To provide medical treatment to victims, including, plastic surgery.
3. To provide legal, social and psychological support and arrange rehabilitation mechanism for the acid attack victims.
4. To regulate sale of acid.

The central Govt. will constitute a National Acid Attack Victim Assistance Board for implementation of the Act. The Board will provide assistance to the victim through a monitoring authority or through any service provider.

After having been prima facie satisfied that a case of acid attack has been made out, the Board shall order an interim financial relief of an amount upto Rs. 5 lakhs, within a period of thirty days from the date of receipt of the application.

Any further sum of money as approved by the Board/monitoring authority, from time to time, shall be met towards the treatment of the victim, subject to a maximum of Rs. 30 lakhs, inclusive of the interim compensation.

Where death of the victim results, the Board shall, on the fact and circumstances of the case, pay a lump sum not exceeding Rs. 2,00,000/- to the legal heir, preferably, the children of the deceased so as to protect the best interest of the children. This would be in addition to any expenses incurred towards treatment of the victim before death.

Consultation on Amendments to Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 and Draft Bill on Prevention of Offences (by Acids) Act, 2008.

The National Commission for Women recently organized a consultation on the Amendments to Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 and on the draft bill on Prevention of Offences (by Acids) Act, 2008 in New Delhi.

Welcoming the participants, NCW Chairperson Dr. Girija Vyas said that in view of the large number of dowry-related cases, the Commission has proposed several amendments in the Dowry Prohibition Act 1961 to make it more effective.

She said that the main features of the proposal, include, taking away of the phrase 'in connection with marriage', from the Dowry Prohibition Act because the term has been interpreted by the courts in a very narrow sense. She said there should be change in the section of the Act that puts both the giver and taker of dowry in the same category. Dr. Vyas said that the girl's family was often forced to give dowry; therefore, the Commission had proposed that the taker of dowry would have a more severe punishment with imprisonment upto five years, while the giver of dowry will be subjected to a lesser punishment of one year.



Dr. Girija Vyas welcoming WCD Minister Smt. Renuka Chowdhury



Chairperson addressing the consultation

incorporating the mother's name along with father in all official forms pertaining to children. Smt. Chowdhury agreed with the contentions of some of the participants about the misuse of section 498A but reiterated that the section was mostly unused and instead of diluting the provision, care should be taken to check its misuse.

The other proposed amendments in the Dowry Prohibition Act, include: a) replacement of the word 'present' with 'gifts'; b) the protection officer under the act against domestic violence to act as Dowry Prohibition officer as well. c) the seven-year limitation for the death of the bride should be removed as a condition for registering a case of dowry death, as in many cases, dowry demands and dowry related harassment continue beyond the first seven years of marriage d) a woman should be provided the opportunity to file a case not only where the offence is committed but also where she is permanently or temporarily residing.

As far as the much-debated section 498 A was concerned, she said that there was no need to dilute the section but an advisory will be issued to all State Govts., where in case of complaints received under this section, investigation should be undertaken by the police and the section should be used only in acute cases where there was prima facie evidence of harassment.

Speaking on the occasion, WCD Minister Smt. Renuka Chowdhury said that in cases of acid attacks, provisions should be made to make the accused in such cases liable for the treatment and rehabilitation of the victim. She further said that an Assistance Board should be formed for such victims and once the board was satisfied about the authenticity of the incident, it would provide an interim relief of Rs. 5 lakh to the victim. She said the corporate houses and industrial organizations would be approached to provide jobs to the unfortunate victims as part of their social responsibility. She would also take up the issue of



A view of the audience

Two Members Join NCW

• Ms. Wansuk Syiem from Meghalaya joined as a member of the Commission with effect from 24th September, 2008. Born in Shillong into an orthodox



and aristocratic family of the then-ruling clan of Meghalaya, Ms. Syiem, had been working tirelessly for decades for empowerment of women and enhancing their status in the society.

Her long tenure in political organizations and administration was marked by her stints as Chairperson of the State Social welfare Board and earlier as Deputy Chairperson of the Meghalaya Road Transport Corporation and Handloom and Handicraft Corporation respectively. Her experience as an administrator and a social activist will help her to work more effectively in NCW. We welcome Ms. Syiem to the Commission.

• Mrs. Nirmala Venkatesh has been renominated to the Commission for a period of three years with effect from 24th September, 2008.



A former member of the Karnataka legislative council, Mrs. Venkatesh has been working for the poor and downtrodden for many years. Widely travelled, throughout India, Mrs. Venkatesh's first-hand knowledge about grassroot women of India and her experience as a former member of the Commission will stand her in good stead during her second stint in NCW. We welcome Mrs. Venkatesh to the Commission.

Members' Visits

- Member Yasmeen Abrar held a meeting with DM, S.P. & ADM of Sowai Madhopur and discussed about the meeting to be organized on Panchayati Raj clubbing with "Chalon Gaon ki Ore."

Later, she visited the jhuggi cluster of Khirnee and Malarana area and discussed with the rural women about their problems. She also explained to them the importance of education, social awareness, their legal rights and functioning of NCW.

- Member Neeva Konwar visited Jorhat and held a meeting with women representatives from NGOs and SHGs relating to empowerment of women



Member Neeva Konwar (middle) with representatives of NGOs at Jorhat

in the region. She also went to Majuli where she interacted with the representatives of various Govt. departments, NGOs and SHGs. She discussed the problems of women and also assured that she would take up the erosion problem of Majuli at the appropriate forum in New Delhi.

- Member Wansuk Syiem addressed a meeting in Shillong attended by officials of the Social Welfare Department and various women's organizations and expressed deep concern about rising crimes against women in Meghalaya. She said unless women became more literate and economically independent discrimination and violence against them would continue.

She appealed to the State Govt. to play a proactive role by conducting legal awareness programmes among women, assisting them with pre-litigation services and facilitating speedy delivery justice in cases related to women's issues.

She also emphasised the need to review the existing provisions of laws affecting women and recommending amendments for any lacunae in such legislations.

Important Decisions

• Family indicted for suicide

Delhi HC has held that any willful conduct which is likely to drive a woman to suicide amounts to cruelty and refused to quash dowry harassment proceedings against a man and his three family members for allegedly harassing the daughter-in-law, for dowry and driving her to suicide after she gave birth to a girl. HC asked them to face trial on charges of abetment to commit suicide. The trial court judge had framed charges against the accused under 498-A for the offence committed under the Indian Penal Code (IPC).

• 'Wife, kids to get maintenance from day case is filed'

The Supreme Court has ruled that wives, children and even parents deserted by their husbands, fathers and children, respectively will be entitled to get maintenance from the date they filed the application for alimony in the trial court.

This ruling reverses a standard judicial practice to grant maintenance from the date of verdict on the application made under section 125 of the Criminal Procedure Code, which provides for interim arrangement for sustenance of the dependents pending decision on a matrimonial dispute.

The Bench said if alimony was directed to be paid from the date of verdict, the husband would keep delaying the proceedings.

Well done Bijlipur

Even as Punjab has the dubious distinction of having one of the lowest sex ratios in the country, a village in Ludhiana district has proved to be a remarkable exception. The average sex ratio in Bijlipur over the last six years has been recorded at 1800:1000, as opposed to Punjab's overall sex ratio of 874 females per 1000 males, according to the last census.

In the period between April 2002 to March 2008, the village has seen the birth of 32 girls and 17 boys. In addition, the village currently has 32 girls between the ages of 3-6 years.

Surinder Kaur, the local Anganwadi worker revealed that not a single case of female foeticide had been reported from this village and attributes it to the high emphasis laid on education. "The village has only one school. But the people are concerned about the education of the child. The girls cycle down to the schools in the nearby town of Samrala".

Sarpanch Charanjit Singh informed that 70 per cent of the village's population has passed high school. Citing his personal example, he said. "I have four sisters. All of them have a post graduate degree and are happily settled".

NCW rescues 3 minor maids

Exposing the alleged nexus between human trafficking agents, the police and placement agencies, the National Commission of women (NCW) raided and rescued three household maids from West Delhi.

The raid happened after NCW received complaints about the mistreatment being meted out to Renuka Kujur, a domestic help employed at an East Patel Nagar House. Earlier, NCW member Manju S Hembrom had helped Renuka's family with the murder of her sister Rosila who used to work as a domestic help at a jeweller's house in Palwal, Haryana. Renuka's family in West Bengal called Ms. Hembrom after the girl somehow managed to contact them.

NCW takes suo motu action against Nokia

The National Commission for Women has taken suo motu action against Nokia after M.J. Soni committed suicide in Bangalore alleging harassment by two managers Teja and Sachin. Preliminary investigations by Member Nirmala Venkatesh revealed that Soni had complained that Teja was harassing her and he had been rating her low on performance, despite her good work. But the department failed to conduct an enquiry and ignored the case. When Soni complained before the HR head about the two men, the two lodged a counter complaint of low-performance against her. Moreover, the company did not have a cell to redress harassment cases which is mandatory, the Member said, who later met Nokia's managing director and the HR officers.

for further information visit our website at : www.ncw.nic.in

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