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Sheelu Francis

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I, Sheelu, was born into a Christian family, which gave me a lot of opportunities as a child to get acquainted with poverty, loneliness and so on. As a child, I accompanied my parents to orphanages, old age homes and jails. I was living in Madurai, a city in south Tamil Nadu, which is often referred to as a glorified village. After my schooling, I came to Chennai, the metropolitan city, for my college education. The character of the city, my college, Stella Maris, and the standard of the students who were studying there personally shattered me. Being a timid and an introverted person, it was difficult for me to understand the language they spoke and be part of the elite society. My only solace was NSS – National Social Service, which took me to the hutments in Chennai. My whole learning came from here.

I always knew what poverty is but what I saw in the hutment area was the depth and width of it, the true colour of poverty and its dirty teeth. My formation school was the hutment (slum) area of Chennai. The women of the hutment area were my teachers. Their lives are full of ups and downs. Their lives are those of constant struggles and challenges. I saw bare naked life there, how women took their lives as challenges and moved forward. The men hardly played any role in either bringing up their children or taking care of familial matters. Most of them were drunkards and contributed very little to the family. I learnt my confidence, my boldness and my leadership skills from these women.

After my graduation, the British High Commission sent me for a diploma course in "Gender Planning in Development" at the University of London, which facilitated me towards a job at OXFAM. This took me all over the world and gave me a wider understanding of the politics of development and this is also when my first entry into the women's movement took place.

My first experience was the national conference of the autonomous women's movement at Calicut, Kerala. I then joined the anti-liquor movement in Tamil Nadu. The rural women were much stronger and protested very resolutely. I can vividly recollect the incident where women hired trucks, raided the illicit brewing spots, carried the illicit liquor to the police stations burnt it and poured it empty right in front of the police station. The women stormed the police station that did not take action against illicit brewing. We had carried protests in all small towns, cities, metros, and corporation areas. We were frequently challenged by the anti-social elements, sometimes by politicians and local goons. One of the activists' husband was murdered by the anti-social elements. Two women leaders were also murdered. However, the struggle continued till the government took over sales of liquor and stopped all the illicit liquor sales. Now the struggle is for total prohibition. It is a continued fight. The women have not given it up. It was easier when the enemy was outside the establishment doing anti-establishment activities. It has now become more difficult when the feud is within the establishment, but the fight continues.

The anti liquor movement slowly shaped as a violence against women movement during the pre-Beijing process and we tend to analyse all the issues as violating the rights of women – be it social, economical, cultural, environmental or political. The whole issue of reservation played a very important role in the advocacy work. We have analysed globalisation and the WTO agreement violating the economical and political rights of women and the movement strongly took position against these. The campaigns were many folded, focusing on various issues – globalisation, WTO agreement, privatization, liberalisation, Coca-cola/Pepsi, Dupont, multinational companies, Special Economic Zones, genetically modified food, sand mining, granite quarrying, chemical farming, use of pesticides, Special Export Zones, mineral water companies, foreign direct investments, Koodankulam Nuclear power plant, Hyundai and Ford car companies, cancellation of debts of most indebted countries – Jubilee 2000, Indo-Pak Peace Initiatives, anti-nuke, total enrollment at schools, child labour rehabilitation, 50 per cent reservation for women, bio-diversity conservation, climate change resilience, rain water harvesting, traditional seed savings, seed banks, ecological farming methods, tree plantation besides domestic violence, rape issues, sexual harassment at work place, eve-teasing, sexual harassment at schools and colleges, corporal punishment at schools and colleges and human rights violation issues including dalits, tribals, Sri Lankan Tamils.

In Tamil Nadu, the character of the women's movement has changed from one of self-introspective, intolerable mindset to that of all-inclusive, intertwined nature. The original gender analysis, which focused only on the social construct of roles and responsibilities of women and men and their problems, unfolded into a wider understanding of the social realities of the respective society from the gender, caste, and class perspective. The women's movement became the champion of the marginalised people. In Tamil Nadu they are at the forefront of all the issues. There were no issues unturned, unattended – all others felt complete or even comfortable with the presence of women's group. The women's presence was felt everywhere. The World Social Forum recognized women's movement in India. In Tamil Nadu, the women's movement took the lead while other social groups joined hands for the fight against various globalisation issues. Today, the women's movement is playing a leading role in ecological farming, climate change resilience initiatives and food security issues. They are siding with the farmers on the natural farming initiatives and the strong campaign against GM food – the so-called second green revolution. They are part of the anti-corruption movement and the forum for electoral integrity.

The twenty-first century is marching ahead with a strong involvement of women in every sphere. Women need to take over governance and create paradigms to be followed. The only problem women seem to have is that their role model is always a man, which is a misfortune immersed in patriarchal values and culture. To come out of this, it is essential that new archetypes should be created by the women's movement, which would be unique and would portray the feminine model of societal values and well-being where social justice would be the base for all sections of the society.

The long awaited women's reservation bill might facilitate their participation in governance but it may still not ensure quality participation of women. There is a need for women's movement to prepare the ground for the same. There are initiatives like model women's assembly and women's parliament exercises through which potential and capable women were initiated into political processes. The move from women's movement to train potential women candidates across the parties to equip themselves about the wider global issues, micro linkages and the policy formulation exercises in Government has made it possible for women of different sectors to come together, to analyse and to learn. The initiative of shadow government in Tamil Nadu might provide more scope for building women's capacities and knowledge of functioning of the government. However there is still a long way to go; the political participation of women is just in the budding stage and it might take longer before we enjoy the fruits.