



Sound & Picture Archives for Research On Women

Growing Up in a Village

G Shanta (GS): I am the last child in my family. I can't recollect my mother ever scolding me or beating me. In the same way, even in those days—only now words like 'feminist' have become popular. But now, when I think of the life I led in those days, my mother was a feminist par excellence. Her philosophy and principles were feminist based. Now when I think of all that, I feel proud and get goose-pimples. She never regretted being born a woman. She had a majestic personality. I grew up in a village, and my mother was very famous among those who lived there. She used to be an advisor to many. In a family ridden with disputes, both mother-in-law and daughter-in-law would come to her with their grievances and seek her advice. I would feel confused. But my mother would say [that] if they give vent to their anger and emotion, their problem would get solved without much ado. And she would not divulge what the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law said to her, to the other party.

Dr. CS Lakshmi (CSL): What is the name of the village?

GS: It is a village called Kallupatti in Madurai district. Kallupatti Gandhi Niketan, most people would know about Kallupatti than Gandhi Niketan. My village Vandadi is about 14 Kms away from Kallupatti. It is a small village. Even now, the school there has classes only up to 8th standard. Though I was brought up in such a rural environment, I was familiar with both rural and urban settings because of our family environment. Because I have three elder brothers and one elder sister. Since all my brothers were settled in Chennai, I was familiar with the busy life of Chennai and the basic unhurried lifestyle of a village. I would say it was a big opportunity. It proved beneficial for me to figure out which were the things acceptable in a village and which were considered normal in a city. Because in a village, caste still has its stranglehold. It is so even in our village. As we enter our village, just then would be the street where the leather workers live—Chakkiliar Theru, then Pallar Theru—another low caste street, then Nadar Theru—meant for upper castes. From the layout of the roads, you can make out the caste hierarchy. The people there won't mingle with another caste or sub-caste. But even then, in our village there were 18 castes like Pallu Paduru and Pallu. It was a multi-caste village. Even when I was young, I remember certain details that most who belonged to the upper caste will not partake of any food in the houses of the lower castes. But my mother once told me, in her ancestors' time, a little child accidentally entered the house of a lower caste and they gave it something to eat. When the others came to know of it, they had the child killed. Caste had raised its ugly ferocious head, one could say. Even now conditions have not changed....

A Bad Marriage and Thereafter

... And then in my personal life, an accident that occurred in the name of marriage paved the way for my setting up women's organisations like this... Because on June 8th, 1982, a ritual took place in my life in the name of marriage. But after the mangalsutra was tied around my life, I realized that dowry was a very cruel [system] that could have a big impact on a girl's life, even though I was very clear and emphatic about dowry at that time. I had decided that I would never marry a person who demanded a dowry. I was also very choosy. I rejected many who came to see me as a prospective bride. I would say 'I will not marry this person, nor that one.' My mother began to panic, [afraid] that she would never be able to get me married to anyone. And then a man came. He had studied Tamil literature. I was passionate about Tamil. Even when I was young, they used to have a section to be learnt by heart. I would have learnt everything in it by heart.... I would learn all the poems by heart. Even my teachers would wonder 'Why is it that you have this strong love for Tamil?' And, when I found out that he was doing his PhD in Tamil literature, talks between our families about our marriage were being finalized. And I had already spoken to him before marriage. At that time, I was a senior instructor teaching transcendental meditation. And soon after our marriage ceremony was over, after the auspicious hour was over, I heard about this. And when I saw my strong-willed mother, who was not easily swayed by any crises, shedding tears, it left an indelible mark on my mind. The groom's mother had told my mother that the house which my parents were gifting to me, until its registration was over, our first night could not be performed. This is what I was told. And my mother had wept then. It flashed in my mind that the price I would have to pay to surrender my body to my husband was this house. So I found that it was not a girl but her body that was being sold. I was furious, filled with rage and repugnance. And after that, even though there was no marital relationship that materialised out of this ceremony, it took me almost four years to get a divorce legally. And the talk among all my relatives was 'That girl's life has been ruined.' And when I heard that this is what they were talking about me, I mused about the fate of all those middle class girls like me whose dreams had been shattered. And I decided I should establish an organization, an institution for girls who were in the same boat. So you can say that this incident was like a catalyst, which turned out to be the foundation for my present way of living....

Setting up DAWN

CSL: And this NGO you joined in Chennai, what was its name?

GS: CDRA. Then they change CDRA into ICRA and shifted it to Bangalore. I worked for a few months in Chennai. It was there that I learnt about a about a registering society or a Trust.

CSL: What is the expansion of CDRA?

GS: Centre of Development, Research and Action.

CSL: And ICRA?

GS: Institute for Cultural Research and Action. ICRA.

CSL: ICRA, okay.

GS: At that time, I had a lot of opportunities to give training to many NGOs and to interact with many companies and other NGOs to provide an opening for employment to NGOs I was training. But I observed one thing. I have seen that in many NGOs, programmes for women have only secondary importance. They are not given priority. Those who were at the head of these NGOs were all men. Therefore, in some concerns, the wives of these men will be put in charge of overseeing women's programmes or they will be coordinators. Nobody as a director. And when I asked questions about such an anomaly to my friends in this patriarchal society where male domination is the norm rather than the exception, women cannot function or manage on their own. This is what they felt. But I took it up as a challenge. Therefore an organization wholly managed by women—you see, there are a few things that woman alone can do. For example, can a woman be employed as a driver? And as an office boy? Because such a person will be sent on errands everywhere. Will women be able to do it? That is why, they said, women are not employable in such posts. Then itself I decided—the organization I would establish will have only women manning all posts and it would be an organization that would prove that women can discharge duties that have been men's prerogative. That is why I established DAWN, an All-women's Organisation in Chennai. For that matter, we registered it in 1987 under the Societies Registration Act. It was situated in Saidapettai in Chennai. Because I had spent a major part of my life in Chennai studying in SIET, I felt more or less at home in Chennai.

... But even then I could say it was an accident that brought me to Virudhunagar. I don't remember the year nor the month. But in a village called Meenapatti near Sivakasi, we read that there was a big accident in a factory manufacturing crackers. At that time we had a woman working in DAWN, who belonged to Sivakasi. She said, "Whatever appears in these newspapers is not true. Many young girls would have died. Their names will never be in the list, in the register. Some came here to investigate. We went and met the collector. It was then that we knew that the matchbox industry and the cracker industry were being conducted on a large scale. The land was drought prone. The sun bore down all the year. We thought they were exploiting these climatic factors. And when we went to the schools, the names of many girls would be in their registers. But they were not to be found in the schools. They would be sitting at home, filling matchboxes with matchsticks. Or they will be stuffing tubes of crackers. It would be filled with sulphurous material. But as many as 70% of the girls never went to school, though they had the opportunity. I felt this was a gender issue. That's when we realized that a woman's status does not change for the better even if she earns handsomely. The financial status of a woman does not play an important role in determining her value or her status. Mainly because of that we decided to start our work in Virudhunagar district, and began our work in the villages. Even then, many people tried to discourage us. They said, "Don't be so idealistic. You come from big cities and try to impose the way of living and thinking in the villages. You cannot change things overnight. They will not accept your way of dressing." I retorted, "I grew up in a village and I knew what living in a village is. I know the basic qualities, feelings and emotions of a village. Yes, I did leave for Chennai, because I got an opportunity to study there. But I feel I will be able to cope because I am familiar with the urban and rural lifestyles and I am determined to help women who are being denied any opportunity to improve their living standards." And we began our job.

CSL: How did the name DAWN come about?

GS: Even that was influenced by Maharishi (Mahesh Yogi). In all his cassettes, video cassettes, Maharishi would begin [his] speech with DAWN, Age of enlightenment.... DAWN could be looked upon as sunrise or to dispel the darkness as there are many patches of darkness in a woman's life. It is brightness. I could come from any corner. But women in need, we felt, was very important. Because we felt that though the facilities and the employment opportunities had increased for women, one would not say that she was truly liberated. There were some invisible chains around her. So wherever there are needs for women to be fulfilled, we felt we should have Development Action for them. And when we tried to match these two, the name came out almost as a natural corollary. Development Action for Women in Need, therefore DAWN. And when I looked at the name, I was filled with joy. Many would tell me, what is in a name after all? But I would say, there is a lot in this name. Each name has a background. Therefore ...

CSL: When did you start this?

GS: It was established in Chennai in 1987 and we had it registered.

CSL: Was your mother alive then?

GS: She was. My mother was alive, yes. But my mother was not cast in the same mould as other mothers. She was different and I have seen that. She had an excessive trust in my ability.... I had studied it thoroughly, the plus and minus points. But she would lament, "You keep changing jobs. You were getting a good salary there. If you persist in behaving like this, you might remain unemployed for a long period of time." But as if regretting all that, "But of course you know about all this, you would have thought of

the repercussions. You are highly educated and well-read. You have travelled a lot. You have gone to a distant place for your training. I am not in the same class, I have not read much. I was brought up in the hinterland, in a small village. But as a mother, I should caution you, shouldn't I?" And again she would also say, "If we keep working for financial security, we cannot bring about any change," she would support me. At times I could sit with her and talk about so many personal, private matters. DAWN's Activities

... And we used to ride on cycles to go to the villages and since only women worked in our organization, when we would approach women, the men would come forward and say, "My wife knows nothing. You tell us what you are going to do. I will explain it to her." And if we ask, "Are you educated?" the men will say "No." And we would retort, "Your wife is also uneducated." They would still insist, "She knows only cooking and nothing else." So we decided to use a subterfuge to counter this, which would bring us closer to the women. So we thought of an entry programme. We thought of starting a Balwadi, Play School in the villages. We began that in 10 villages. So the women would come there to leave their children. And when we began talking to them about the problems of their children, the men began to leave automatically. These are all women's concern. "You ask them about all that." Then we began telling the women "This child is restless. That child keeps beating other children. There may be some psychological reasons for this." And if we start talking like this, men will beat a hasty retreat because they do not seem to have any interest in all this. Realising that not much money would come their way, they would say, "Talk to our wives." And so after that we closed these schools gradually. Because we did not consider running them to be our business.

CSL: Because you looked upon it only as an entry.

GS: We used it only as an entry. Therefore we did not return to it. But because of our interaction with women, there were some benefits arising out of it. It was this way. Because as time went, the women shared with us not only their personal problems but also family problems. Because a family is a separate institution, anything connected with it should not be discussed with others. All such thoughts and ideas were only a myth as we came to know later. They would share even intimate details about sexual intercourse, how violent their husbands would be. Even then they would say, "You are not married. So you do not know about all this." So, hesitantly they would start, "I want to talk about it." That way, the ice was broken. Later, two women committed suicide in the village in which we worked. Their complaint, "My husband picks up a fight with me all day for no rhyme or reason." And if they go to their parents' home, they are not allowed to stay there for long. They are advised, "You have to listen to what he says and try to adjust." Then there was a girl. We had a tailoring centre in that village. It was actually just a ruse to get the women to meet there. Because if they say they are going to learn tailoring, they will send them. Not if we talk about gender. And one girl who was coming there, her mother complained that she was not willing to live with her husband. She said, "Please advise her." Only after we spoke to her did we know that she suffered unbearable pain during intercourse. But if she told him, he would say, "You are only acting. Don't pretend." She said he was not willing to listen to her. I had a friend who is a gynaecologist. I took this girl there. And after examination, she said the girl's vagina was full of sores. And the girl said, "My mother is not allowing me to talk about all this. She says nobody talks about these things." And to rub it in, the girl was married to her own maternal uncle. And after I got the girl treated and cured, the girl began to enjoy her marital life. Then her mother came and told me, "See, you have done what I couldn't do. I never knew that this would be the problem."...

... CSL: When I hear you talking, I feel you formulate your programmes according to the needs of the women whatever they need. That is, you do not make a programme and take it to them.

GS: No, we don't.

CSL: After that you also travelled to many places and spoke to many women.

GS: Yes. Because when we established our Women's Association in the villages, in all reports, this is how I would begin the first paragraph. 'Because you have to look at women's problems with a separate, a woman's perspective,' I would start my preamble with this statement that only if one looks at women's problems in this way, only then will our actions strengthen women. Then I would talk about other things. I would look upon Women's Association as the instant cure for making women strong. I would look at them from both angles. Why our social, cultural and political environments emasculate women. Even some of the plans formulated by the Government are like that. They make the role of women more burdensome. But women, if they are alone, are timid. But when there are four of them, they start talking boldly. If one woman is teased in the bus, she is scared. But if there are four of them, they turn on the mischief-makers. That is why I felt the model of an association was the best.

CSL: Now how many associations are there, formed by you?

GS: There are more or less 200 of them.

CSL: When you were talking, you said your associations are working in 60 villages. In 60 villages there are 200 associations, isn't it?

GS: Yes, when we began working on certain projects, we looked upon them as a pilot project. Because many people cautioned us, saying since it was an all-women organization, it will arouse the suspicion of men. Moreover, some men are of the opinion that women would start quarrelling and such associations weaken a man's position. Therefore we selected five villages and worked for 6 months. It was only after that did we gain confidence. We understood that men were only giving voice to their inner fears. Even now our aim is not to work in many villages and run many associations. If that was our target, if we had kept a target of 50 associations per year, we would have achieved so much. But it is not so. Because a women's association is a woman's space, a grassroots level organization where women can give vent to their grievances, find solutions for them and try to lend a shoulder to another woman, that's all. Our concept is that by being a member of these associations, women would be able to solve their problems. That is why we are determined not to have a profession of women's organizations. Because our time and energy will be spent on running and managing them....

... GS: ...ASW (Action for Solidarity of the World) were the ones who provided our first funding. Even though it was a very small amount, I still considered them to be the best funding agency. Because even when we discussed women's issues through the perspective of a woman, they were willing to approve of them....

... But we did a few things. Like taking loan from the bank and buying land. What we earned from the land went towards repaying the loan. Now DAWN has nearly 20 acres of land. Women are doing farm work there. But what they earn from this is taken away by their husbands. Women have no control over that. So even these, we enforced a model. When we talk of women as farmers, what everyone visualizes is a man ploughing the land or driving the tractor. Nobody thinks that a woman can also be a part of that. When they talk of a farmer, they underline a female farmer. Even recently, a woman was able to raise a sizeable harvest in Tirunelveli. But when they talk about her achievement, they say 'a woman farmer.' Why? A farmer can be a woman or a man.

CSL: It is a common term, isn't it?

GS: It is a common term. But it is never put into practice, into common usage. So they qualify someone as a female writer. In the same way, when these women say, "We do farming too," they say, "Oh, you know all that job? You know about farming also, is it?" Now our income out of that has become our corpus fund. So the paddy we reaped and other grains we sold and managed to fund our activities here. We managed to do that...

A Space for Women

... GS: In many families, when there is a fallout between husband and wife, women go to their parental home. But if that percentage increases beyond a limit, the parents start resending it. "Try to manage and live there. You have been married only for two years. So don't come here." Then we began telling them through our associations that "You can come and live unconditionally if you are not able to get along with your husbands."

CSL: You have got something like a Home.

GS: Yes. And when [we] welcome women here there was opposition from the men working in these villages. They said, "You are supporting them, encouraging them to separate from us." We said, "No, it is never like that." And then the husbands found out that they could not manage without their wives. They would come and ask them to return. Then we would lay down conditions, "You should not beat them. You should hand over all your salary." Then we would tell them, "You give your consent to our conditions in writing and then you can take away your wives." But if even after that, some husbands do not turn up, our staff will go and talk to them. Suppose we set up a house and talk, they will say, their ego—"My house is empty without her," then if we ask, "Then why don't you come and take her back?" They will retort, "She went on her own. Head-strong woman, let her come if she wants." Then we should have to soft cushion our stand. We will cajole them, "You should not think like that. She is not an outsider. She is after all your wife." We will try to placate him and send her back. But those conditions that we laid down gave many women security. Because where they believed that there was no one to question them, the situation changed and the women got the upper hand. They threatened to go back to DAWN, if the men did not mend their ways. The situation changed. Almost women from 200 to 300 families would come to us with their problems. They would be with us for 10 to 15 days. But these small warnings, "Please give it in writing." But if they go back to their old ways, we will pretend to browbeat them, "Remember you have given it [in] writing. We can take action against you." But all these have borne profit. Now there is a change in the behaviour of both men and women. So we have our gender training for women—young women who are not married—I will [show] you those articles on gender-training. Sreeji Publications have published them, calling them Gender Training in the Guise of Tailoring Programme!...

CSL: Which film did you say, you showed them often?

GS: Chinna Thambi. They said the film was very popular among women. We got a cassette of the film and showed it to the girls. There is a widow, portrayed by Manorama. To humiliate her, they will cover her with coloured sari, put bindi on her forehead. That means if a woman wears a bindi, a widow wears a bindi, is it something shameful? Only after asking questions like this did they say, "See Madam, all these days we thought on those lines!" And in that film, the girl loves a man, who is a servant in her house. He would have his food on a plantain leaf and throw it in the garbage bin. Then she would come, pick up the leaf from the garbage bin and eat from that, secretly. "Does it mean only if one eats from the soiled plate of one's lover, it is love? Eating out of a soiled leaf?" Once we began asking question like this. "But do they show in any film a man eating out of the soiled leaf from which his wife has eaten? They say women do it because they love their husbands. But it is not love but repression." And young girls immediately catch on to talks like this. Like camphor burning as soon as it is lit. But we also know that the environment in DAWN is vastly different from the environment prevalent at home. To help them cope with these two opposite environments we send them home every two weeks even if they are not willing. And then they will tell us the problems they faced in these four days. They would tell us, "We were not aware of all this before. When we were called 'Pottai Kazhudai' (She-Ass- a- derogatory term, a prejudice reserved for women), we would feel ashamed. This time we asked them the equivalent for Pottai Kazhudai in English. There was a fight. We will discuss about all this. We would tell them they should be very clear in their minds but at the same time their approach should be soft. We would advise them. So some girls even decided to remain unmarried. Then we told them it is better to marry someone whom they like than to shun marriage. If I had not given them that three months training, the marital lives of these girls would have been very different. Even now we feel we should persist with such conversation. Because even before a girl gets married, she is brainwashed into believing that she should surrender completely to her husband. She should be submissive. And the final piece of advice is, 'Do as he says. Do not question'. But nobody advises the new groom that he should respect the feelings of his wife and not hurt her...."

CSL: Do you conduct any special campaigns here apart from the training centre?

GS: Yes.

CSL: For example, you spoke about violence.

GS: Violence against women. Even now, [there] is no law with Indian Penal Code on Domestic Violence. Even now when women go to the police station to register a complaint against their husbands who beat them, the standard reply is, "Who else will beat you apart from your husband?" There is a film song which preaches 'The hand that beats also fondles.' Since this is the situation, since there is a connection,.... Some of them give us new insights, because we keep in touch with them. So we formed a collective called 'Thamizhagha Penngalin Kattamaippu' in Chennai for women who lived in the districts of Tamil Nadu. It was at the same time that DAWN was established. It was set up at the same time....

...And again, in another conference, we raised the issue of female infanticide being practised in our neighbouring village Usilampathi. We are very active members in the campaign against female infanticide. We are also very intense in our campaign against sex-selective abortions. Moreover in the campaign against child labour until last term, I was the District organiser. Now I am a member of the Working Committee....

Mother Who Drives the Jeep

CSL: You also told me, when Sudarshan (her adopted son) was asked in school, what his parents did for a living, what did he say about you?

GS: They would teach in UKG what their mothers did. Most of the children would say housewife. He knows his mother is not a housewife. But what does she do? He comes and asks me, "Amma can I say Daddy is a policeman?" "No, not a policeman, but a businessman." "Okay, what can I say what you do?" He did not understand the term Executive Director. "What does that mean, Amma? I told my teacher my mother drives a jeep. But she said women don't drive jeeps," he said. Then that she does a lot of social work. He knows that I go to villages to work. He has come with me. He would shout with us. "Educate young girls, send little girls to school!" (Laughs). So I would tell him, "You tell your teacher my mother works like this!" But he would say, "How can I say that in one word? I cannot understand. Some say their mother is a teacher, some say my mother works at home. So what do I say?"

I told him, "Your mother works to bring a change in society" He said, "Ah! Now I know!"



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