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Woman – the scapegoat

Experiences from India

topics:

- violence and sacrifice
- violence against women
- theories about violence
- psycho-social problems of women
- movements in India to overcome violence against women

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Introduction

As I was struggling to write this paper, I heard an experience from a friend who heads an organisation consisting of 215 members. Her staff venerate her as a mother, almost as a goddess and call her *Amma* (mother), though she detests it. If anything goes wrong and she questions them, the immediate response is “Amma, you said so” or “you only asked me to do so, Amma.” There is a refusal to take any responsibility for what has happened and a tendency to look for someone to be blamed or scapegoated. In my career as a counsellor, this experience of being scapegoated was echoed by many friends and clients. Invariably all of them happened to be women, and they said, it affects relationship, distances people, prevents people from taking responsibility, causes stress, anxiety, leads to judgement and ultimately retards growth. I have also had the experience of being scapegoated. This used to anger me “why should women be scapegoated?” It is not fair ... it is not ethical. I wanted to “fix it”, going against my profession of being a counsellor. I ventured by explaining to people the seriousness of such mentality and appealed to their rationale, intellect, faith, sense of morality and even proved that it is against Biblical faith especially to conservatives who quote scriptures for every action of theirs.

My simplistic, value based, moralistic and faith-perspective approach ended in a failure. This annoyed me further and I started searching for answers. I have come to a conclusion that scapegoating is a form of sacrifice rooted in a philosophy and that it needs analysis. It is a complex global phenomenon seen in both developing and developed countries. It is an acquired phenomenon, learnt in society during the course of socialisation through imitation and identification. ‘Scapegoating’ is not an isolated subject; to understand it, one needs a multidisciplinary approach since it has many fields involved such as political, economic, social, behavioural, religious, cultural and psychological.

The purpose of this paper is not to give answers, but

- (a) to pose the problem of scapegoating which seems to be rampant and increasing,
- (b) To trace the various philosophies, ideologies and belief systems that influence scapegoating, and
- (c) give a brief summary and critique of other women's movements and give suggestions to address this issue.

The methodology is to study select practices in India and deduce from it the principle of scapegoating and establish its relation to violence. The first part of the paper will deal with definitions of sacrifice, violence etc. the second will be a narration of a few incidences with deductions and conclusion.

Definition of terms

In the definition of terms, the intention is not to trace various theories but select an existing definition or summary definition:

Violence and force are interrelated. I agree with Gelles that violence refers to those acts that society views as non-normative, while 'force' to those acts which fall within society's definition of legitimate behaviour.¹ I have a problem in accepting force as Girard interprets it. What does he mean by legitimate behaviour, because what is legitimate behaviour to one person/society may not be legitimate to another who sanctions such a behaviour. Violence against women is often seen as an assault against a body but more important is a negation of her integrity and personhood.

There are various categories of violence such as overt, covert, legal and illegal, just and unjust.² Gelles identifies three categories of violence:

1. Normal violence,
2. Secondary violence – violence used to resolve conflict which is contrary to the family values; this creates additional conflict which produces further violence-violence perpetuates violence;
3. Volcanic violence, when the offender has reached the state where he cannot hold any longer with problems which erupts into violence.³

I do not subscribe to the view that violence is necessary and is a beneficial attribute of human life, for this view is influenced by Charles Darwin's theory which promotes violence on the basis of the understanding of progressive competition in which the fittest survive and the weak are eliminated. Nor do I prescribe violence. Some call for a total annihilation of violence to have a benevolent, rational and non-violent involvement. Others advocate the use of violence as a tool in revolutionary process to overthrow aggression. I would detest the use of violence for personal, social and economic benefit and attach value to such heroic character traits, such as bravery and courage.

Sacrifice: I would agree with Girard's concept of sacrifice, however biased it is that the victim is not a substitute for some 'endangered individual' or to quench the thirst of an individual's 'blood thirsty temperament' but a substitute of all members themselves. He further says that sacrifice protects the entire community from its own violence and they choose victims outside themselves.⁴ Here I would interpret community especially consisting of men and also women who are conditioned to believe certain myths and philosophies as given by God and sanctioned by religion. The victim outside themselves are mainly women.

Selected practices

Our discussion about the general kind of ‘scapegoating’ as seen in mundane transactions, or in daily lives, will be focused on certain practices which are not common (as there are no accurate statistics) but true happenings. I am selecting a few.

A. The practice of Sati ⁵

Sati refers to the action or event whereby a woman is immolated on her husband's funeral pyre or a woman is placed at the centre of this spectacle "sati" as a goddess. Sati was the name of the goddess.

The English used ‘sati’ as an object of the verb ‘to perform’, ‘to commit’, which connotes committing a crime or suicide. Sometimes it also refers to the person who burns rather than the circumstances in which she dies. We see a reversal in the Indian languages, especially Hindi: Sati is understood as a rule rather than an exception, the focus is purely on the person rather than on the practice of sati, and means to venerate a good woman (*sadhvi*), a woman devoted to her husband (*pativrata*), as a goddess. It is devoid of any judgement.

Origin: Sati was originally grounded in a non-religious ruling class, a patriarchal ideology, and later glided with notions of valour and honour. Many stories are seen in the puranas and epics. It is told that Sati, wife of Lord Shiva and daughter of Daksha, in defence of her husband opposed her dad's insult of not including her husband in the sacrifice, and killed herself by entering the fire. Later the ‘laws of Manu’ (a traditional collection of laws) were used in advocating ‘Sati’. Even in the 17th century stories are told of women committing ‘Sati’. This practice was banned through the efforts of missionaries and Hindu reformers and the East India Company legitimised to abolish this practice in 1829. Pandita Ramabai, a Brahmin convert, later shows the fallacy of such texts and gives proper interpretation saying that widows are called to live.⁶

Present: Today there are many shrines dedicated to Sati Matas and stories inscribed on stones. Villagers in different parts of India tell tales but are unable to give dates or names. The sati of 18 year old Roop Kanwar in Deorali, Rajasthan on 4th September 1987 caught the public eye and led to many debates and writings and became a political issue. Some demand a temple in honour of her, which is still an issue. Roop Kanwar was an educated girl married to a student who died suddenly in mysterious circumstances. He was medically diagnosed as having acute "gastro enteritis", and a "burst appendix". Others say he was poisoned. The motive for the last cause is not clear. Sati was arranged immediately and even before her family came, the funeral pyre was lit by the brother (Pushpender Singh) of the deceased (Mal Singh) who was later arrested and released.

Anti-Sati Group: such as feminists and others demanded a legal action. Their findings were

- (a) Roop Kanwar was forced on the pyre in spite of her deliberate attempt to escape,
- (b) There was a possibility of her having been drugged, and

(c) The motive of the in-laws was primarily economic, the rationale being they arranged for immolation on a plot near their own home rather than in the cremation grounds. There was an expectation of huge offerings and later the erection of a shrine, which was forbidden by the government and still people are requesting for a temple.

The counter-defence group (advocating Sati) called themselves Sati Dharma Raksha Samiti ("committee for the defence of religion"), later shortened their name to "Defence of Religion". It was run by educated men in their twenties and thirties. When the anti-Sati-group mustered 3000 people, they had 70,000 people marching in favour of Sati arguing that the government had no right to intrude into the realm of religion by attempting to suppress the practice of Sati. The political parties (Janata Party and Bharatiya Janata Party of Rajasthan) rallied and supported the cause. Though there was ban on written slogans, Sati was glorified at the oral level such as 'Sati mata ki jay', 'Roop Kanwar ki jay' (victory to mother Sati and victory to Roop Kanwar). This shows the inability of the law to stop any deaths.

Analysis: This is clear evidence of scapegoating women in a form of sacrifice for vested interest in which the practice is accepted as cultural and baptised by religion. Such a practice has religious sanctions. There is a gradual development of such practice which slowly imbibes culture, ethics, morality, and legality, philosophy and develops into an institutionalised monster protected by the state. Christianity is no better, women's sub-ordination or subservient position and denial of ordination is all proved from Scriptures.

B. Witch hunting

Today women are named as witches in certain sections of the Indian society and are mutilated and killed.

Background: The tribes of Bihar, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh are demanding for a separate Jharkhand State.⁷ Among them the inheritance of land is through the male line; but within this system, the women have had certain definite, though limited, rights of land which have evolved over a period of time. They are of two kinds:

- (a) The right to manage the produce and share the produce and
- (b) the right to divide and sell the land. The widow acts like a surrogate father having equal rights of maintaining and passing the wealth. This residual life interest in land restricts the property rights of the male agnates of the deceased husband, and they have to wait till after the death of the widow and her children to have any rights.¹⁶

Witches: In the same society there exists a belief that women have an evil influence and are capable of being witches. Some women are identified as witches by 'witch finders' called Ojhas (spirit healer), predominantly men. They collect information from the complaints made by the people about the witches and give a warning to witches to behave. Then he names them as witches and all deaths, misfortunes, tragedies are attributed as a proof of the witches' unrepentance. Finally they are driven out of the village, killed or mutilated. These witch hunters have power and are ruthless that they are called as "unmitigated scoundrels".

Myths surrounding witch hunting: One of the myths surrounding witch hunting is that men wanted authority over women and sought wise man for power. The

wives heard about this and tricked the wise man and learnt the secret, which was 'to eat men'. Both the husband and the wise man were disappointed. As a reaction the wise man made men experts in witch hunting, in addition to the power they had in conducting rituals, as rituals were a taboo for women.⁸

An analysis of the witch hunting:

(a) Victims are women: Various studies show that the victims were women (mostly widows and aged), and they were related to the accusers, the murderers invariably were family members. "Out of thirty five cases, eleven were against the brother's wife (sister-in-law), eight were against the husband's mother (mother-in-law)".⁹

(b) Protection of men's rights: Political leaders and certain advisors argue that witch hunting is an attempt of male agnates to remove the threat to their property rights posed by the widows' interest in life.

(c) Economics: Dr. Ram Dayal Munda, Head of the Department of Tribal and Regional Languages in Ranchi University confirms that the cause for witch hunting is rooted in economic reasons.

(d) Political: T. K. Kapaz representing the All India Santal Conference asserts that witch hunting is political. He bases this on his study of the function of witch hunting, which is basically used by the dominant class to get rid of people who politically oppose them, as well as the unwanted females whom they had used for pleasure.

Conclusion

Moving from the two extreme cases, scapegoating is seen in day to day life. Papers daily report of dowry death in spite of anti-dowry bill. I hear stories from female clients which are hurting. Each story is different but in all these stories the common feature is women who are victims for the survival of the stronger. In all these incidents there are common features.

(a) It is the sacrifice of the other and not the sacrifice of the self, where force, persuasion and at times provocation are used.

(b) In the scapegoating of the these cases a common element that stands out is that it were always the weaker sections for the benefit of the stronger, meaning men, policy, and religion, all to preserve patriarchy.

Psychological perspectives

One could see the psychological benefits of the scapegoating. There is an assertion of one's ego, authority, pride and identity in scapegoating others. I see this in the practice of Sati as well as in witch hunting. In the former the widow brings the pride, name and honour to the family and those who enforce it exercise their authority and their power.

'Anger' and 'aggression' are necessary elements for self definition. I agree that in the act of violence toward another, the attackers attempt to defend themselves from a sense of "vulnerability", "pain" and "anxiety" or even annihilation. This is true in the case of Sati and witch hunting. In the former, just after the death fear,

guilt, pain, anxiety, vulnerability are part of the grieving process. Even before they could resolve or work through their grief, they involve in attacking and deciding the fate of another. In the latter, again 'pain' and 'anxiety' are connected to see the family property being in the possession of a women. In both cases it is more of a defence of men of their feelings, property and right. Scapegoating is a form of resolving one's conflict. In attacking another the families attempt to resolve their conflict.

Even fear is resolved in 'Sati' by erecting a temple. There is still a cry for the temple in Deorali, Rajasthan, in honour of Roop Kanwar. Worship, Ritual and elevating the victim to the status of a goddess is a way of appeasing the wrong doings or even justifying their action, a clear pacification of violence. Pacification here I mean as silencing rather than peace.

Scapegoating as a sacrifice is structural and is rooted in the men's desire of control and it is to perpetuate the exercising of male power. One is aware that unilineal descent groups such as blood sacrificial religions are found among pre-capitalistic societies that have some degree of technological development. Lineage structure is particularly for control and inheritance of productive property such as land and cattle etc. These groups transform biological descent in the interest of social continuity in order to celebrate intergenerational continuity, they are willing to sacrifice 'Women', eliminating the women for the male line to continue. To perpetuate this male line and for the exercise of power and control, the 'weak' have no protection or place.

Effects: Women go through psycho-social problems.

(a) When women are subjected to violence and sacrifice, and are scapegoated there is disintegration in the 'self' of the woman as she is alienated from herself. This state is what Charles H. Boon calls "confused identity". Erik Erikson who traces the psycho-social development of human beings argues that identity formation is a pre-requisite to achieve intimacy.¹⁰ In the Indian context, women's identity is closely linked to her attachment to men. For example, women derive identity first from association with fathers, then husbands, later sons, always in relationship to males who have control over them. Women's sense of self is always traced to her experience of violence. Identity and intimacy are always closely inter-related, never separate. Though a woman may be talented educated, competent and independent outside the home, at home she subjects herself to her husband's control. Charles H. Boon opines that women live in two worlds, with "two simultaneous but incongruent experiences of self". Though she is aware of her strengths of her self yet she struggles between her experiences.

(b) Along with her struggling self and the present fear for her safety women spend all their energy on learning survival skills. Some women who have developed positive self esteem have to live in the atmosphere of fear and intimidation at home where criticism, blame and punishment are normal to her.

(c) I use the words "conflicting self" or "struggling self" in order to indicate an ongoing process between self and society instead of 'false self' used by Donald W. Winnicott which gives a negative and pathological connotation for the development of an external self designed to please others but to cover the turmoil and pain that characterise the inner self.¹¹

(d) Some women ultimately disown their bodies, mentally absent themselves from their bodies and become spectators watching from afar. Disassociation from the physical selves becomes normative, which is contrary to holistic growth.

(e) Finally discrimination and scapegoating made women to be treated as objects. Female persons and female sexuality are conceived as objects for national and political control, dominance and analysis.

Acknowledgement and critique of various movements ¹²

(a) Some activists use *Marxist ideology* to address injustice. Marxism has provided the ideological frame work for the liberation of exploited sections. Yet in Marx's analysis the emphasis is on the economic issues, such as production, exploitation and property. The assumption is that surplus production achieved in a settled agricultural production will solve various forms of exploitation. For me Marx's view of liberation is limited in the way that change from private ownership to collective ownership of the means of production will end all oppression. This may address the class issue but the caste and religious ideologies will remain.

(b) *Women's Liberation Movement* which burst on the scene in 1960 focused on patriarchy as the form social exploitation and violence. The emphasis was on the conflict between men and women. and the dialectics of sex. The importance of 'sexuality' was seen as a potential power for women's liberation. Violence has been a central theme in organising against rape and wife beating. But their emphasis was similar to the traditional Marxist view on production, exploitation and property. Their preoccupation on sexuality and dialectics of sex took precedence over violence and sacrifice.

(c) *Cultural Feminism*: The trend is to accept the difference between men and women as irrevocable and men as naturally prone to violence and women as non-violent, yet seeing women as superior. They are exclusive and moving towards God oriented spirituality viewing science, and technology as dominating, militaristic and patriarchal. Though there is strength in their analysis, their preoccupation with differences and accepting men as being violent and their exclusiveness prevents providing a holistic framework to address violence and sacrifice.

(d) *New Movements*: Autonomous eclectic feminist groups comprised of both, rural women (peasants and poor) and the urban educated women. They all have their own particular emphasis but the similarity is the asserting of their rights not in isolation or with feminist groups or with women's wings of political groups but with social movements. The context is given prime focus in their reflection.

(e) *Ecofeminists*: They bring together all the themes such as production, violence and sexuality. They take an interdisciplinary approach in discussing issues. They give naturalistic explanations of violence where men are rapists of earth and women have productive relationship with nature.

There has been a paradigm shift from addressing violence in relation to men to a larger system. This is indicated in the resolution of a women's conference of Nasi Mukti Sangharsh Sammedan which met in Patna. They pointed to the state as the major support of violence against women: "Women face specific forms of violence: rape and other forms of sexual abuse, female foeticide, witch-killing, sati, dowry murders, wife-beating. Such violence and the continued sense of insecurity that is instilled in women as a result keeps them bound to the home ... we recognise that the state is one of the main sources of violence and stands behind the violence committed by men against women in the family, the work-place and the

neighbourhood. For these reasons a mass women's movement should focus on the struggle against them in the home or out of it".¹³

This group raised several questions: "... 4) What is the effect and incidence of violence on different classes, castes, communities of women? ... 5) What is the relationship between specific Indian traditions of sri shakti or prakriti to violence against women; in particular how is this violence related to caste structures and traditions?"¹⁴

One observation of this group is their experience of more of social violence than violence at home. They point out that they have relative independence with regard to men but are more assertive than the sheltered upper-caste/class women and can fight back with no inhibitions.

Indeed all these movements have contributed in bringing awareness, producing literature, setting up of family courts, removing 'consent' in dealing with rape cases and passing anti-dowry bill.

Suggestions for Pastoral Care and Counselling

I wish to reiterate the already known areas.

1) Education

- a) To explain laws pertaining to women.
- b) To provide technical details in lodging a criminal and civil complaint, the difference between cognisable and non-cognisable offences, bailable and non-bailable crimes, civil rights and civil remedies.
- c) To initiate studies as proposed by women's groups on relationship between violence and sacrifice.
- d) to study the correlation between globalisation and violence/sacrifice against women

2) To address the tendency towards glorification and pacification of violence, in the media.

3) To rethink our approaches and methods used in pastoral counselling and reconstruct new therapies.

As we concern ourselves in this conference to engage in serious dialogue and action to bring liberation to the many who suffer violence, Flavia's (a victim's) poem may encourage us:

*You can bend me but never break me,
'cause it only serves to make me,
More determined to achieve my final goal,
And I come back even stronger,
Not a novice any longer,
'cause you've deepened the conviction in my soul.*¹⁵

Notes

¹ Richard J. Gelles: *The Violent Home. A study of physical aggression between Husbands and Wives*, Los Angeles (Sage Library of Social Research 13).

- ² Cf. Lakshmi Srivastava, in: N. Sinha (ed), *Women and Violence*, New Delhi: Vikas Publ. House, 1989. See there p. 20f.
- ³ Cf. Gelles, *op. cit.*, p.20.
- ⁴ Cf. R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, Baltimore/London 1979, p.8.
- ⁵ For the following cf. the articles in: *Sati, The Blessing and the Curse. The Burning of Wives in India*, ed. by John St. Hawley, New York/Oxford 1994.
- ⁶ Cf. N. Arles, *Pandita Ramabai and Amy Carmichael. Their Contribution towards the Transformation of the Position of Women in India*, unpublished M.Th.-Dissertation, University of Aberdeen 1986.
- ⁷ The region of Jharkhand covers mainly the Chotanagpur Plateau, split between the Indian States of Bihar, Bengal, Orissa, and Madhya Pradesh. Cf. (also for the following): Govind Kelkar / Dev Nathan: *Gender and Tribe. Women, Land and Forests in Jharkhand*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1991.
- ⁸ W. G. Archer: *The Hill of Flutes. Life, Love and Poetry in Tribal India*, London, 1974, p. 292f.
- ⁹ Cf. A. B. Chaudhuri, *The Santals. Religion and Rituals*, New Delhi 1987 p. 167.
- ¹⁰ Cf. Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, New York: Norton, 1950.
- ¹¹ Cf. Doanld W. Winnicott, *From Pediatrics to Psychoanalysis*, New York: Basic Books, 1975.
- ¹² For the following overview cf. Gail Omvedt: *Violence against Women. New Movements and New Theories in India*, New Delhi: Crescent Printing Works, 1990.
- ¹³ Resolution of a Women's Conference, organised in February 1988 in Patna, Bihar (India). In this conference, 700 women gathered and discussed various topics, representing a wide coalition of Women's Groups ranging from those who call themselves 'Autonomous Feminists' to women's organisations connected with radical mass movements. Women and violence was an important issue for three days and 10,000 were organised in a militant mass rally on the fourth day.
- ¹⁴ G. Omvedt, *op. cit.*, p.8.
- ¹⁵ Flavia Agnes, *My Story*, Bombay: Ms Insta Print, 1984.