

# Janina Gomes

## A Woman and Her Self

### *Self-Actualization and Self-Realization in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

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This reflection may hopefully prepare our minds and hearts to celebrate meaningfully the International Women's Day which this year will fall on the second Sunday of Lent. The author seeks her identity as a middle class urban Christian, an identity that goes beyond the narrow confines of a Church affiliation and so can make a contribution to creating a truly liberating space for all women to be equal partners in the enterprise of building a new society free from narrow class, gender or religious prejudices.

As a 21<sup>st</sup> century Indian Catholic woman, living in Mumbai, examining her self-identity, how would I define myself? Would I define myself narrowly as an urban woman, living in what is considered the most liberal city in India? Would I define myself as a woman belonging to a certain Parish never looking beyond its church walls? Would I define myself as a single woman, a Goan, a middle class woman who has inherited middle class values? Or would I seek an identity in the work I do, the neighbourhood I live in, the social class I belong to?

I have been privileged. I lived in a protected family as a child and had all my needs met. I have never had excessive money, but I have never starved, been on the streets or struggled to make ends meet. I was born into an urban setting when opportunities were opening up to women. I was able to live and work abroad, to mix with people of other races and cultures, benefiting from the broadening this brings to one's outlook. I was able to work as a journalist for many years, engaging in the nation's concerns and able to find a voice through the media. My middle class background brought me a measure of acceptance in the English speaking world of middle class Indians. If I examine my identity with only these parameters, how would I speak about woman and the self: self-actualization and self-realization in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

Every day I read and hear chilling facts about women - that in India 50 per cent live below the poverty line and that globalization has resulted in further feminization of poverty, wresting out of their control even the traditional jobs they once engaged in. I see women working in the unorganized sector with unsafe and deteriorating working conditions. I see pregnant women even in the cities, who obviously do not have the means to access health services which are too expensive for them, ending up with poor maternity care - pre-natal and post-natal. I may not see the same emaciated women in Mumbai that I sometimes see in the villages, but I know for a fact, that they receive less nutrition than their male counterparts. I am struck and horrified by the number of illiterate women I meet, even in Mumbai. Even today there are many middle class wives who have never got beyond the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> standard. In the villages. I know it is much worse. Girls have to carry the burden of housework, work in the fields, and double up for all extra chores. How can I define myself only in terms of the education I have received and the opportunities I have enjoyed? What about child marriages, the dowry harassments, the daily reports of rapes and murders, even bride burnings? Many are reported from cities like New Delhi, the capital of India. Do we think that these things happen only in other communities? Do we think that Catholics are so progressive that there is no harassment of women in our communities? How then would you explain that married women, even more widows and single women can still be harassed by Catholic men and professionals in 21<sup>st</sup> century Mumbai? Are women too ashamed to report these things? Why do even Catholic men think that a single woman is always available? Is that not a commodification of women, treating them as objects? I do not know how widespread these phenomena are, but they are not isolated incidents. Women domestic maids in Mumbai can be harassed, sometimes sexually, and Catholic homes have not been exempt from that. Women being examined by male doctors can be examined in a disrespectful way, and we know from experience that Catholic doctors are not above that.

Women in city suburbs like Bandra in Mumbai were once comparatively safe in their homes no longer. Walking on the streets is also not quite the same it once was in this cosmopolitan city. There are undesirable elements, ill-behaved youth and college students, the young frequenting discos and cozy corners. As a 21<sup>st</sup> century woman, I am still limited in what I do, what I say, where I move around and whom I mix with, because of the level of societal violence around me. I have not experienced domestic violence personally. But every time I go to a hospital and have the opportunity to talk to Catholic ayahs, I hear stories of how they are routinely beaten up by their husbands and sons, how they have to bear the economic burden of bringing up the family as well as doing the housework, how plates of rice can be thrown at them by their husbands, or how their husbands drink and harass them. What has happened to all the so-called Christian values we are supposed to have inherited? Is gender equality just mere talk? Are middle class homes better? Have men educated in Christian educational institutions been taught to treat their partners as true equals?

We know that in rural India it can be much worse. Poverty, malnutrition, illiteracy, unsafe conditions of work, lack of

health facilities, susceptibility to diseases, physical and sexual assaults by men, sometimes domestically, sometimes by upper caste men, can be worse. When I travel by train during the monsoons and see women in Maharashtra engaged in rice transplantation work, I know how difficult it can be and how it often affects their pregnancies. Though women in India are getting politically empowered, with more representation in Panchayats, Zilla Parishads, State Assemblies and even Parliament, we know that women have still not found their voice. Where they have, they have often brought issues of social concern like health, education, ecology and even movements against alcoholism to the forefront. Economic opportunities are also opening up. But we must remember that the Green Revolution helped to marginalize women and their agricultural work further. There are now opportunities in IT, food processing, horticulture and other sunrise industries. Women in India are said to be breaking the glass ceiling. As a 21<sup>st</sup> century urban woman do I seek my self-actualization and self-realization only economically? What about my sisters in rural areas, the Dalits, the untouchables, many of them Christians? I find very little space in Catholic journals devoted to women's causes. Who is going to listen to the pains, the traumas and the live stories of suffering women? Should not the Catholic Church be listening to some of these stories? And as a Catholic woman living in a city, am I to be satisfied with a small circle of middle class women and only their concerns?

I know of some Protestant groups that organize *chintak baitaks* (think tanks) for Dalit women to help them document their oppression so that it becomes history. They give these women the opportunity to publish their pain, pathos and liberation stories. They organize training programmes for them to raise their awareness. They sometimes include conscientization programmes on these issues in their Sunday school curriculums. The World Council of Churches organized a workshop at the Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary in Madurai on "Challenging Dalit Women's Status Amidst Economic Globalisation," with a display of Dalit Art used as a weapon of liberation. Ms Kalei Magal and Ms Sankili Priya were able to narrate the experiences of the violence they faced as Dalit women in Tamil. Their accounts were translated into English. The work of Ms Swathy Margaret, a Dalit middle class university educated Telugu speaking Christian woman who is a research fellow at Hyderabad and who has done considerable work on Dalit women has been publicized. She challenges the Church to engage upon the politics of difference and to understand that the self-definition and particular positioning of women in India is determined by patriarchy as it operates within and between different castes and the caste identity of individuals. She explains how she also experiences a sense of alienation from the feminists of upper castes, with no shared fears, pleasures or problems, because they do not seem to have a "caste" to bother about. Dalit women not only experience violence from men of other castes but also from Dalit men who do not see their fight for equal rights as extending to Dalit women. She found she had to develop her own tools to explain her exclusion, and challenges the Church to help dissolve the crippling effects of burdensome identities.

Do we have any creative initiatives in our Church institutions, our educational institutions, to bring these issues to the fore? It is a common complaint that even Church institutions, hospitals, schools, colleges are dominated by a Catholic elite. India's silent apartheid against the underprivileged and women also exists in the Church. I found that as a woman, after being marginalized, I had to find alternative networks of support. I do not want to seek my identity as an Indian and as a Catholic in a narrow inbred group. I do not want my choices to be limited by social interactions with Church groups that have become entrenched in their ways of thinking. My quest for security, self-esteem, justice, must extend beyond my religion and class I would like to work with groups that meet real human needs and in an inclusive way. I also seek my identity in groups that understand history and are prepared to change foundational structures. I would like to seek an identity, by using the networks of communication available, to help build a new culture where women can find space and freedom to be themselves, without being limited by physical and emotional violence.

Women are often more prepared to suffer than inflict suffering. That is why it makes me deeply unhappy and uncomfortable when I find 'so called' liberated women behaving like men. There are also women who, given position, power, status and a voice in decision making, learn to exploit others. I have also seen some women in the Church, who given a measure of importance, begin to use their new found position and importance to dominate and not serve others. It is a model of leadership they have picked up from men. It is sad that when given a chance and an opportunity they do not bring to their new found positions the real strengths of a woman, such as patience, gentleness, compassion and sensitivity. Even in our Church institutions, there are imperious women principals, administrators and leaders who exercise their power in the same patriarchal way. I refuse to seek my identity in such ways and to find self-actualization and self-realization by making these ways my own. As a 21<sup>st</sup> century Indian woman, I have become aware of the unity of all life. I realize how interconnected we all are as human beings. Globalization and the media bring the cultures and the lifestyles of others right into my home. While I choose not to identify with its negative aspects, I realize how telescopic the world has become. The world is shrinking: in the process my identity acquires more and more global dimensions.

As a woman I am more aware of my carbon print and my eco print. I try in my own way to raise consciousness about global warming, climate change and adopting sustainable clean technologies. Is it not a woman's role to conserve nature, not just bring physical children into the world and nurture them, but also to nurture the planet and all life? As a woman I am committed to raising the standard of life and the quality of life. I do not want to settle for the mediocre. In my profession, in my contribution to life, my relationships, my worship, I would like to raise the bar.

As a lay woman, I am often pained at the short shrift given to women, especially lay women. It is not only the priests and the hierarchy who do that. Even lay people have been taught to learn only from priests. They will

not listen to other lay people, to other wise voices, to those who speak in an unfamiliar language. Our Church may have missed many revolutions. But one of the biggest revolutions it is missing out on, is the women's revolution. Some women are talking about sexual freedom, licentiousness, extreme independence, the right to divorce, abortions, etc. Most are talking about a more fundamental freedom, their inherent dignity and the right to be treated as "equal children of God." The daughters of God must find a place alongside the sons of God. In this complex, changing world, where women astronauts are exploring space, women professionals are performing physical, emotional and psychological feats, where women theologians are finding their voice and women speak of their own spirituality, which can be different from that of men, I seek to realize myself in a culture that will truly liberate me as a woman; and if I do not find a culture to express my voice, to help create one.

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