

Reaching for Half the Sky

The Eighth March Story

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The market makes and unmakes wants and dreams, creates aspirations and drowns hopes all at once. One huge phenomenon that the mighty and unforgiving hand of the market has created and controls are the red-letter dates in our calendars. Almost every month is dotted with one or the other auspicious day. A mother's day prompted a father's day with a grandmother's/grandfather's day not to be missed out. From friendship day to sisters/brothers day together with valentine's day and other traditional occasions – we have it all. Rather the market

has it all! While I am disturbed by this sly method of packaging, prompted by profiteers who want every event, relationship, process and ultimately even human beings to be turned into commodities to be bought and sold, my primary objection is that in this 'buy a card' for the day mentality, the history and sacredness of special days is distorted or erased, co-opted and abused, with little thought and understanding about their real significance.



One such date that is increasingly being misunderstood is the one celebrating women's lives. **8th March** is observed worldwide as **International Women's Day**. Woman's day is not about glorifying and celebrating "womanhood" and the "feminine". It is not about MTV woman of the year or business-woman of the year. It is not about women achievers or celebrity women. Rather it is about celebrating the lives of ordinary women as makers of history. It is about remembering struggles and hardships faced by women who challenged stereotypical notions of who women are and what they should be. It is about women who fought to break out of the fixed roles assigned to them such that they are respected and valued not because they are "women", but because they are humans. Woman's day is about the centuries old struggles of women to participate in society on an equal footing with men. On Woman's day, women on all continents come together to look back to a long tradition that represents at least ten decades of struggle for equality, justice, peace and development. It is a day of solidarity, to strengthen old bonds and build new bridges. A day for dreaming new dreams, charting new plans and meeting new challenges.

Woman's day, which is also commemorated at the United Nations and is designated in many countries as a national holiday, was first observed in 1909 with a call by the Socialist Party of America to celebrate National Woman's Day in the United States. In 1910 The Socialist International meeting in Copenhagen, established a Women's Day international in character, to honour the movement for women's rights and to assist in achieving universal suffrage for women. This resulted in International Women's Day being marked for the first time in Austria, Denmark, Germany and Switzerland in 1911, where more than one million women and men attended rallies demanding for women's right to vote and to hold public office, right to work, to vocational training and to an end to discrimination on the job. In 1913, as part of the peace movement that was building up to protest the impending World War I, Russian women observed their first International Women's Day. By 1914 other parts of Europe also marked women's day by holding rallies to protest the war or to express solidarity with their sisters. In 1917, with 2 million Russian soldiers dead in the war, Russian women again chose the last Sunday in February to strike for "bread and peace". Political leaders opposed the timing of the strike, but the women went on anyway. The rest is history: Four days later the Czar was forced to abdicate and the provisional Government granted women the right to vote. That historic Sunday fell on 23 February on the Julian calendar then in use in Russia, but on 8 March on the Gregorian calendar in use elsewhere.

In pre-independence India, Women's day was first observed in Lahore on 1st March 1931. Post Independence India celebrated 8th March as Women's day for the first time in 1975. The occasions marked a rich past of struggles and successes. The Woman's movement in the country has shaped the lives of not just the women, but the very life of the country itself. Women contributed to and shaped the reform movements of the 19th century that saw huge shifts in the attitudes of society towards issues such as those of women's education, widow remarriage, sati etc. They actively

participated in the nationalist movement beginning in the late 1800s till the time of independence. In the 20th century, women in the country campaigned against price rise and alcoholism, for just wages, land rights, laws pertaining to violence against women including dowry, rape and sexual harassment at the workplace, control over resources such as forests, water and rivers etc. Interestingly, in Meghalaya too, there were collectives of women, the most known being Ka Synjuk Kynthei, established in 1947, which took up issues that were not far removed from those in the rest of the country at that time. Today, the Indian woman's movement is at the forefront of anti-war protests and peace building efforts as well as campaigns to combat growing fundamentalism, communalism, *hindutva* and fascism in the country, and to challenge neo-imperialism that has come in the garb of globalization. Here in Meghalaya, groups are struggling for policies and structures to be put in place to combat violence against women and for equality. They are involved in struggles where they can decide about their lives and about policies and structures intended for them, such as the struggle for a more democratic and effective state women's commission.

While the issues and responses have been many, the one thread linking all of these struggles has been and continues to be the struggle for gender equality and justice. The challenge continues to be against patriarchy or the unequal power relations between men and women which exacerbates and is itself made worse by other inequalities based on class and poverty, ethnicities, religions, caste etc. The struggle is about challenging systems and structures that teach, insist on and work towards maintaining the stereotypical notions of gender based roles and identities of men and women and the relationships between them. These institutions and structures, which include the family, community, state, market, religion, media etc. help perpetuate gender inequality that leads to discrimination and exploitation.

It is unfortunate that just as there is a tendency to misunderstand woman's day there is also a tendency to misunderstand the woman's movement itself. It is not only women's groups that make up the women's movement, and the groups that do, are not necessarily homogenous. For instance, we find groups that continue to work from a welfare approach, where their aim is to fulfill women's needs such as those of food, shelter, clothing etc. There are those who not only focus on the practical needs but who approach women's issues as being about rights. This approach breaks the dependency cycle and is more sustainable, because it empowers women to advocate for their rights, which in turn ensures that their needs are met. Talking about rights is a long-term intervention, because it aims at changing attitudes and mindsets that help breed gender bias and discrimination, and attempts structural and systemic changes such that laws and policies take into consideration the historical discriminations that women have faced and hence adopt measures to first create enabling conditions for women, so they can enjoy true equality and not be passive beneficiaries, easily manipulated by all sorts of forces including market created and market driven agendas.

The market however, is not just about everyday buying and selling. There is also the market of aid and funding. In the ever-mushrooming NGO industry of our state, gender and the woman's question is suddenly high up on everyone's list. While this should be a cause to celebrate, a note of caution needs to be applied because this trend may be resulting from the plentiful money and funds available for doing "women related development". This meaning that gender and woman's issues are being reduced to activities to be done within a set budget and a set time. These activities end up mouthing correct jargon without much understanding of the meaning and history of the terms and perspectives. This women's day too- we would have many events, token celebrations in all the available conference rooms of the city and for the next one year we would have done our bit for the women. But, on this 8th March, we need to remember that International Women's Day was not proposed in the posh environs of conference rooms, but on the streets of the world, where women challenged traditions and braved stigma. They faced the wrath of the powerful, yet they struggled for a just world. It was about destroying structures that oppress and putting in their place an egalitarian social order. Theirs were radical acts, not acts of compromise- acts of which revolutions are made of.

We cannot therefore reduce the day or the struggles of the women's movements worldwide to seminars, workshops, greeting cards and rhetoric alone. The celebrations should not detract from the daily year-long responsibility of all towards this struggle for change. We need to commit 365 days of our attention to the issues that we flag and raise and we need to pledge unrelenting support to those who initiate campaigns and struggles around these issues. We need to acknowledge the struggles that have been forged and we need to challenge structures of power so that power can be experienced positively, where the power we know is the *power to*, *power with* and *power within* and not *power over*.

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