

CAR... (a)...VAN

Beyond boundaries

Thousands of years back, the invention of 'the wheel' must have induced a supreme sense of wonderment in the hearts of women and men of hunter-gatherer tribes roaming in forests, mountains and caves. The realization that in addition to their own feet and that of animals, here was something which could enable them to go to far off places and also faster, must have dawned on them with a deep sense of bewilderment. Today, observing the myriad ways of using the wheel we take it for granted, we tend to consider it almost 'natural'. We forget how this one invention brought about fundamental changes in human existence, metamorphosed the concepts of speed and access and opened the doors to a new world of dreams. The 'wheel' became a trigger to revolutionise human life. From bullock carts to aeroplanes, from watches to computers—none of these would have been possible without this one invention.

Women's stories of change collected in this book revolve around a specific set of wheels, of cars which have now become integral to urban life and are also reaching villages. These wheels have helped in revolutionising the lives of many working class women in different parts of the country. These include the lady drivers trained by Azad Foundation, women who are spelling out a new vocabulary of life through these wheels.

Established in 2008, Azad Foundation envisions that these women are enabled to become not only professional drivers but more importantly, create new identities for themselves. Azad wishes that together with means of livelihood they get to live a life of dignity. Women and girls do earn through various skills and arts like tailoring, embroidery, knitting, making papad, pickles or working as beauticians, nurses, receptionists, secretaries and many other professions. Moving beyond these skills why did Azad choose driving?

Driving is considered to be a male profession. Two things are paramount in this - freedom of mobility and technical knowledge. And men hold sway on both. Whenever one thinks of a scientist, manager or technical person, it is a man who comes to mind. In the last 2 -3 decades this myth has been broken. Women have become hand-pump mechanics, engineers, bricklayers, pilots and soldiers. Despite this when we say 'driver' it is a male who comes to mind. The general view is that men are more intelligent, women cannot understand technical things. Then, if women start driving they will become free. Better keep control over their minds and mobility, keep them away from wheels and steering wheel. Also Women are unsafe on roads. And men will lose control over them. Women becoming drivers crosses many such boundaries. Azad has rigorously worked at empowering them on various counts - economically, socially and personally to cross these 'luxman rekhas'.

Residing in workers' settlements in Delhi, Jaipur and Kolkata, these women have left the so-called secure walls of their homes to negotiate public places. The profession of driving not only provided them with means of livelihood but the freedom to know and experiment with technology and to acquire mobility. Thus they felled two fortresses of patriarchal control. They drew new lines on old stereotypes, broke several myths like technical work is men's domain and women cannot drive cars on city streets at night. They took risks, faced the roughness of roads and crossings, jibes, comments and violence in the home as well as out-side. The paths are difficult, there are challenges and speed breakers. Several women left mid way in the training. But many continued to move further to reach fresher milestones.

Azad not only turned them into professional drivers. They taught them to trust themselves and to develop their potential. The women received trainings on a range of issues- laws and regulations related to driving, gaining proficiency at different levels of driving skills and etiquette towards clients, self-defense techniques, gender and women's status in society etc. Understanding of issues and practical work are done with full rigour. All told 6-8 months are invested in getting a good driver trained. In these women's journeys, Azad has also networked with and taken support from other ngos, companies,

agencies, the families and friends. Lalita and Geeta developed their 'knowledge' base and personality through their regular association with Jagori (an ngo working on women's rights and feminist training), which has been their source of empowerment and guidance. Organizations like Literacy India and World Vision and several individuals have provided material and moral support at several crucial junctures of the lives of these women.

Why these stories

Azad had to choose 12 out of many stories of these lady drivers. More could have been taken. However, the book had to be small and certain basis was decided to choose them. Documenting should include not only 'success stories' but also the challenges, difficulties and struggles that they faced, and where one could also see the diversity of empowerment. It was also kept in mind that there has to be a varied panorama -single women, women living with families, young and middle-aged women, women working on their own or within Sakha company, doing private service and entrepreneurship etc.

Through these stories one could tell the world how women have to negotiate complicated cobwebs to walk on new roads, that different types of supports are needed to make one women stand on her own. This is not easy. But through them Azad has created a market for them. These stories can be used for advocacy. The outside world, government, media, society and funders need to understand several things. Any non-traditional, 'un-woman' like profession can give them a sense of freedom. One can understand the difficulties only if one goes deep into the process. These stories reflect the struggles of both – the women and the organisation.

This documentation also throws light on the struggle that resource-poor women have to go through to get out of the whirlpool of poverty in modern urban spaces and how they use their life-skills to survive, for instance stretching their hard-earned money to the hilt and solving problems through negotiations. Their priorities are issues of well-being,

health and education for children, even if they themselves have to walk 7-8 km to save money for instance.

These stories connect the lives of citizens living on the margins to political–economic policies not only of the national level but also of international level. Throwing overboard aspects of self-reliance and self-development of villages and agriculture, today’s global policies consider urbanisation and industrialization as development, which adds to the impoverishment of rural India, pushing people towards cities in search of livelihoods. After that millions of hardworking families are again uprooted from the centres to the margins of cities in the name of cleaning and beautification of these giant urban centres. Many people are uprooted several times. These women too have faced the impact of migration and displacement repeatedly. They had to gear themselves up to - address new challenges in the changing socio-economic, political scenario. In addition to the traditional patriarchal norms they have had to struggle with modern neo-liberal, capitalist patriarchy, which has further commodified women through advertisements for selling and profit-making.

These women drivers however, have learnt to walk on independent new roads of life even while negotiating ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’. What is this ‘walk’? Having command over these four wheels and a steering wheel, how have they broken the chains that bind them in patriarchal society? What methods did they discover to struggle with their own fears, hesitations, desires and frustrations and with their own families and societies? What showed them the way to overcome ‘hopelessness’? Equipped with many such questions 6 writers attempted to look into the lives of 12 women – drivers, trying to understand their difficulties, their conflicts, their strengths, their successes, their joys and their dreams. Intimate stories and emotions require long and deep journeys of relationships to get articulated. Despite their absence these story-tellers have used sharp observations to penetrate into these journeys and try to mirror their lives. Every story-teller has his or her style, flow and vocabulary. It is also pertinent to underline the fact that these are articulations of women as mediated by the writers. Perspectives, expressions and language emanate from the women drivers as well as the writers.

Varied hues of life

In terms of personality, region, language, age, situation and culture there is diversity in the lives of these women. Some like Suneeta and Geeta were scared when they began learning to drive, whereas people like Savitri and Khushi never had any fear. Amongst these are young women like Rabbunisha, Khushi, Lalita, Geeta and Preeta as well as middle-aged ones like Savitri and Shanno. Each one of their families came to Delhi in search of livelihood opportunities and stayed on. Lalita, Suman, Savitri and Poonam came from villages of Bihar. Khushi's family migrated from Jhansi. Their languages, their eating habits had been different. But having settled down in Delhi they started speaking the colloquial Hindustani. They also picked-up some words of English. All of them struggled hard to survive. They did different types of work - domestic work, piece rate work, tailoring, assistant to nurse, anganwadi- workers, running a tea-shop and one of them had to go into begging.

In each family the flavour of relationships has been its own. The mother-daughter duo of Savitri-Poonam received encouragement from the man in the family. Dayaram, the husband-father never stopped his wife. He himself was too scared to drive but he told Savitri, if you are keen to drive go ahead and learn with your daughter. There is mutual love and respect in Khushi's family. Each member has the freedom to choose one's studies and profession. Khushi and Lalita did not face any hurdle in learning to drive. Suman and Hemlata would not have been able to stand on their own if their brothers had not supported them.

One should not forget the contributions of such men. Listening to and reading about incidents of violence and injustice towards women we tend to think that women never get support from men. But like in these lives, if we look around us, we can see that mutual respect between men and women is also a reality. If one woman faces violence two receive love. Statistics tell us that on an average, one out of three women become victims of violence. That means not all women face violence. In these stories also we can discern a variety of situations. Men full of humanism respect their wives and daughters.

The journeys of these women are much easier, whereas women suffering violence at the hands of men developed different personality traits and their trajectory is very different.

Relationship in the families of Savitri and Poonam, between Rabunisha, Suneeta and their mothers, between Hemlata and her brother and father and between Shanno and her children is one of friendship. But Sakshi has acute resentment against her mother, who never gave her any support and always considered her to be a bad omen, a burden. Preeta worked like a slave in the family household. Her parents sold her for Rs. 2 lakhs. Geeta had to finish household chores before going for her training classes. Her two good for nothing brothers just loitered around. Sakshi's husband had doused her with kerosene, ready to light a fire. One hand of Hemlata's is still crooked as the husband's beating had broken the bones and due to paucity of funds she could not get it properly treated.

Protest, struggle and relief...

Thus several of these women have suffered extreme forms of torture. Some had also seen their mothers being humiliated and brutalised. Geeta does not forget how her father used to drag her mother into the streets and beat her mercilessly making her run like a terrified animal. Her mother was always sick and injured. Different types of patriarchy-induced violence are evident in these heart-rending stories. The women have faced all types of violence- physical, mental, intellectual, sexual and economic. However, they moved forward only when they broke their silence, shared their trauma. Generally, violence against women is shrouded in secrecy. Social stigma forces women themselves to keep it under wraps. These women developed the courage to speak up. That is why they were able to get out of it.

Anger against cruelties meted out to them is present in several of them. In some it boiled over with fierce revenge. Suman derived satisfaction after burning the doors of her husband's house. What makes us wonder is the fact that after having suffered so much

they have the heart to go on fighting and to struggle. They possess the wonderful art of sustained engagement with protest, and some have the courage to forgive. Preeta suffered at the hands of every relative. But she forgives each one of them through some logic or another. Her mother had no option, she says, but to earn through dancing, otherwise how could she have brought up her children. Hemlata also took to dancing to feed herself and her son. Preeta feels that no one made her father and brother understand; men are not taught how to respect women. That is why they maltreat them.

With the accompaniment and guidance of organizations like Azad these women learnt to take help from police and the legal system. Even if it meant making many trips to the courts, they were not afraid of struggling. Hemlata, Sakshi, Suneeta and Geeta have the courage to fight court cases against their husbands and families. Suman challenged her husband in the village-panchayat and got him punished. Lalita and Geeta not only challenged the three boys involved in eve-teasing but got them into police custody.

To prove oneself, to earn a name becomes important for them. Several of them also learnt to nurture their humane qualities like love, forgiveness and satisfaction. Rabbunisha feels that being a Muslim means being honest and strong rather than doing prayers- namaz regularly. Several of them connected with the essence of religion and spirituality. Khushi's family felt at peace listening to the prayers of a Christian missionary. They converted to Christianity. Through simple straightforward ways they derived energy from religion. Their belief systems and rituals are integral to their lives. Festivals like 'chath' and 'teej' are important to them. They bring colour and joy in to their lives. New definitions of freedom are being forged, looking critically at ways and rituals of worship. When the light of god shone within them, they crossed over several speed breakers of life. Relationships changed, power-equations changed. Father, who earlier beat them either keeps quiet now or even gives respect. Relatives who were least bothered about them now praise them, give them love and respect. Neighbours who threw sly remarks come to them for advice.

They are satisfied with the fact that they have earned a niche for themselves by becoming drivers, and are today earning for their children, their families and for themselves. Some are dreaming of other heights. Rabbunisha knows she wants to become something else also, not just a driver. However, she does not know what yet. Geeta is studying for graduation through open university, as she wants to become a lawyer so that she can convince men. Suman dreams of becoming the owner of ten taxis and of the daughter becoming an I.A.S. officer. Shanno wants her daughter to become an air hostess. There is a lot more in their dreams – driving a bus, truck, aeroplane or metro train and to travel far. Also, some think of climbing to some higher position, though sitting on a chair may not be that attractive! Some girls say ‘why marry? Did those who marry get happiness? I have to live for myself.’ Parents support them. There is no pressure to get married. Khushi wants to adopt a girl. Perhaps she got the idea from the outside world where several single women are leading their own lives.

Strengths and conflicts

Each one has acquired a new strength, a power that has emerged from within in a way that some feel that it was always with them. In a way this may be true. Fires can be ignited only if embers are there. But you need a flame to do that. Feelings of self-respect and independence visible today, have gradually emerged at specific points of their lives with the help of empowering processes initiated by Azad. This process is a complex one. On one hand there may be feelings of dependence and gratitude towards those who are empowering us. On the other there may be raised expectations as well as resentment, as we are also made conscious of our weaknesses. We can cross our limitations only by knowing them. We can empower ourselves only by understanding our weaknesses. Some realized their strength on specific occasions. Facing the moneylender Lalita realized that she had something within her, on the basis of which she could argue with him. When she and Geeta got their three eve-teasers arrested, they were nervous but outwardly they expressed their wisdom and power.

The complexity of emotions has increased with the deepening of relationships between the organization on one hand and the trainees and drivers on the other. Perhaps some conflict is but natural with the increased expectations from Azad and Sakha and their own self-confidence. The phenomenon of different phases of life and diverse personal traits have also influenced these tendencies. In a few, feelings like 'I am a star now' or 'I cannot be wrong' have emerged.

Today these women have command over different types of power – of power within, of power to do things, power to influence others and the power of togetherness. A new friendship is emerging. When Preeta was asked by the organization to bring two guarantors with Rs. 500/- each, as she had left several jobs within a short time, her friends Pinky and Roshni came forward and she got the job. A sense of solidarity and comradeship is slowly emerging. There is a need to listen more to each other. After all we learn and come together only slowly. Some of the women have also used 'victim power'. They are not giving divorce to their husbands easily, because the men will remarry. It is better that you keep them hanging, it becomes a tool in the hands of the women.

A few last words...

These stories provide us markers to explore deeper into human and social consciousness. How do we look at 'choice' within a framework of any 'ism' or theory as a 'free choice'? Can any 'choice' be free of its context? What is 'human choice' within the spirals of living situations? Our world-views are defined by our circumstances. What fountains of inner strength can one draw upon to exercise one's freedom to move towards harmony as these women are aspiring to do, to understand with love and compassion the complexities of lives, emotions, attachments and dreams? Is acquiring power through freedom part of the agenda? Can power be divorced from values? Isn't conflict part of freedom, the burden of taking or not taking decisions? Outer freedom and inner freedom are both far from and near each other. Economic and social freedom is one aspect of it. To be able to breathe freely, to act freely is another. But to understand oneself, to know one's desires, enmeshed in socialization is another long journey. Freedom also entails

responsibility as each one of these women have shown. Each one feels fully responsible towards their families, friends, the organizations that nurturers them and society at large where they fight for the rights of others. They are not shirking any of their responsibilities. To respect the rights of others together with one's own and talking about social freedom with a sense of humanism and justice is all important. One has to walk the path of freedom only through understanding the balance and complementarily of men and women, nature and society and not through juxtaposing them.

All these women are attached to their belief-systems and rituals. They are essential parts of their lives. They want to be close to their faith, spirituality and feelings. Accepting Indian rituals, ways of workshop and inner feelings and instincts with respect and critical analysis, new definitions of freedom are emerging. Fighting against injustice and exploitation the roles of humanism and spirituality have to be emphasized.

Through their experiences and learnings these practitioners of life-skills have explored and carved out their own routes towards a life with dignity. They are walking paths of a new freedom, acting like beacon lights for many others. The four-wheel car is gradually turning into a 'CAR...(a)... VAN'... a continuing, long caravan of cars driven by women.....

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