

Case 1: Chitrlekha's Story

The following is an extract of a narration received as a mail sent by Carmel Christy and Jenny Rowena, which was forwarded to me. The idea of using it here is to highlight the need to analyze such situations as not merely an issue of caste or gender, but to see how class, caste and patriarchy work in tandem to suppress women even in a relatively 'progressive' socio-political context.

The Incident

Chitrlekha was born into a Pulaya family, which is a Dalit caste in Kerala. Chitrlekha's husband Shreeshanth is a Thiyya (an OBC caste). Both his family and the dominant left party (CPM) structure were against Shreeshanth marrying Chitrlekha as she is a Dalit. Yet the couple went ahead and got legally married. In their attempt to make a better living, they resorted to what many Dalit-Bahujans of moffusil towns easily choose: an auto rickshaw. The auto rickshaw was bought in Chitrlekha's name in October 2004 and she decided to drive it herself.

Chitrlekha also decided to operate from within the ambit of the Payyannur college stand itself. Payyannur, is a busy town in a district which has witnessed some of the most glorious moments in the communist and Naxal struggles against human oppression. However, Chitrlekha's caste and gender identity made it impossible for her to fit into the scheme of this liberated moffusil town. The CITU (the leftist trade union, already angered by her caste violation of marrying above her caste) acted against her by delaying her membership card in the auto stand. In January 2005, she was given the card and she started riding the auto. However, her fellow drivers (mainly from the Maniyani OBC caste) started creating problems just within one week of her public career on the city roads. They broke the glass of the auto rickshaw and beat her up. When Chitrlekha complained to the police, they gave a counter complaint against her saying that she drinks, uses drugs and parks the vehicle near college in vacant places implying that she is a sex-worker. A few days later, the final blow was dealt when Chitrlekha's auto rickshaw was burned to ashes in the middle of the night. She was also threatened that she would be similarly burned. It is highly significant to note that this is the second such incident of a Dalit woman's auto rickshaw being burned in that town.

The Concerns

First of all there are differences in the way the same incident is put forward by all those narrating it– the police, the involved parties, the NGOs involved, the mainstream press, the mainstream intellectuals and the various Dalit and feminist intellectuals who have involved in the issue.

Here we know that we are starting off with the notion that most people involved in this issue such as the police, the auto rickshaw drivers involved and the people of the town would see this as just a case of law and order, caused by the aberrant ways of a rebellious woman.

Our second major concern in the documentation of the event is about what would be our relationship to the central person in the story, Chitrlekha, and her family members. We know that what has happened must have been highly traumatic for Chitrlekha, and we already have heard stories about certain individuals and institutions making away with funds meant to help her. We would surely like to bring out these aspects in our documentation.

Most importantly, in our documentation of her voice we would also like to bring out Chitrlekha, not only as a victim but also as someone who politically resisted the hegemonic structures around her.

Questions for Discussion

- 1.) Do you believe that to maintain social harmony women should learn to operate within the parameters of established and accepted social norms? Justify your positions.
- 2.) How would you analyze the juxtaposition of class, caste and gender hierarchies in this particular case?
- 3.) In your opinion what are the equity and equality concerns in this case?
- 4.) Do such incidents take place in your socio-cultural and regional contexts?