

Women's Victories

Overcoming Marauding Beasts, Debilitating Caste Roles and Paralyzing Self-Stories

I've lost count of the trains we nearly missed and the countless battles for bus seats—sometimes squeezed in beside goats and crates of softly cheeping chicks. Hailing jitneys and gripping tightly as they sped through chaotic streets became second nature. And still, our trek through Maharashtra, India, consumed us, as my travel companion Mari Paul and I navigated it together.

It was late 1977 and a few weeks before the five-day Hindu celebration called the Festival of Lights and/or Diwali. Excited friends reported how oil lamps and fireworks showed up suddenly everywhere in India. Already warm air turned sultry. And yet, people appeared their happiest while celebrating the victory of light over darkness and knowledge over ignorance.

This trip also promised surprises and fatigue galore.

Thankfully, Mari showed up ready for each challenge that we met. Her husband's style and manners, influenced by years of Indian soldiering, had rubbed off on Mari. She stood military straight and gave orders like a drill sergeant. A few days earlier, train officials mopped their sweating heads with damp handkerchiefs while rushing to fill her demands and instructions for train tickets from Bombay (Mumbai today). Was it a little much? Oh-h-h, definitely! But it proved necessary and quite handy.

While Mari and I made our way towards a little village on the outskirts of a regional city in Maharashtra State, I recalled why we were walking down a rutted, dirt road. The Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA), an international development group, where we both worked (she in India and me in the USA), operated a training school for men and women studying "the human factor in India's rural development". Staff there noted, "Actively involved, female villagers insured more thorough and more rapid comprehensive development." Furthermore, teachers witnessed when women got behind projects, like drilling water wells, planting new crops, providing village electricity, medical resources, and schools, a larger number of villagers benefitted. Folks spent less time on who got to be in-charge and more time focused on getting work done. Mari and I entered this village intending to encourage, affirm, and engage women in their own village's future.

The very chance that such a thing might happen here ignited our energies and expectations.

An elder gentleman welcomed us in English and walked us to the village's temple. He announced with confidence: "Our women are on their way." Then he left us to explore the meeting's location.

This would not be the first Global Women's Forum held in a small, 12 x 12-foot, mud-walled temple. However, it turned out to be a first for us because someone else had anticipated the gathering would be "significant". The path up the small incline and into the temple had been lined on both sides with stemless marigold flowers. With obvious intentionality, each flower sat six inches apart from the next marigold up a small rise to the temple's entrance. The orange and yellow colors popped stunningly in the morning sun.

Mari nudged me with her elbow. "This is a good sign: marigolds!"

"Really? How's that?" I asked.

"Marigolds have been decorations at special events since India became India. We use marigold garlands at festivals, parades, marriages, holidays, death rituals, and very important events."

"Humm, well that is impressive." I remarked as we walked into the temple. "Oh, my goodness, Mari! What . . . what is that?"

She laughed: "It must be this village's temple to the Goddess of Fertility, complete with altar and sandalwood incense."

We stood for a moment in total silence. Each of us took in the stone statue in our own way. The statue of two figures: humans, male and female, copulating on a concrete pillar left me speechless. She had a far more appreciative expression on her face.

"You don't suppose, Mari, we can move that out of the center of the room, do you?"

"No, way. Those two figures having sex are cemented into place. Nothing is going to move the sculpture except a bulldozer or maybe a bomb." Just to test her statement, she pushed against the pillar. It did not wobble even slightly.

“Well, in this women’s forum, there will be no front or back of the room then. We’ll be staging this like a theatre in the round.” I mumbled, trying to picture how that might work.

Quickly, we arranged our materials, as about 10 women slowly walked into the temple. These ladies appeared bashful, maybe even a little afraid. They huddled together in a corner opposite the entrance. Mari, standing with hands on her hips in front of the sacred altar, engaged with the women immediately. They wore dull, limp cotton saris. Fabric colors had paled from years of scrubbing and dryings in the sun or perhaps from multiple generation use. Several women stood frozen, looking over their shoulders with big, wide-eyed expressions, like deer eyes caught off highways by fast passing, high-beamed car lights back home. Were they fearful? Just curious? Or a little of both?

As Mari talked with these participants, I organized thick sheets of paper and colored markers. We had learned several forums earlier that sometimes stick-figure drawings communicated better than either of our verbal-only efforts. After weeks of facilitating women’s meetings together, we needed no team huddle this morning to decide which one of us would do what; we’d settled assignments last night before bed. Mari would play the role of first facilitator. That meant she would open, give a short talk, lead an afternoon workshop, the ending evaluation conversation and serve as interpreter. I would support her efforts, lead a workshop and a conversation about female heroines plus deal with materials. It would be a heavy day for Mari, but she loved being at the helm of an adventure, and this surely qualified as one. We had this dance down.

An additional group of participants, 15 to 20 women, flounced into the shrine noisily chatting, giggling, and speaking all at once. In bright pink, royal blue, emerald, and yellow saris, they moved about as if in a parade. Their final settling down place made caste lines obvious.

What are those soft zinging sounds? I wondered to myself. *Over there among the newcomers, I heard a sliding chink-ching. Oh, there it was again. Humm, mystery solved!* The last arrivals wore glass bangles, dozens of glass bangles, and an occasional gold bracelet on each arm. The women’s gesturing as they talked created interesting music. But the notes abruptly stopped. Suddenly, the scene filled with screams and screeches as a pack of

barking caramel-colored dogs followed a few of the last arrivals. The dogs bounded into the shrine in show of frightening strength.

Eight snarling and lunging dogs herded the crying females like sheep into one shrieking and wailing mass. The dogs nipped and leaped at us, creating dust clouds rising from the temple's dirt floor. Participants huddled closer together and yelled louder as tears ran down their faces. In that unbelievable commotion, I heard my inner self whisper: "Those dogs gotta go!"

Mari told me later that I stepped forward and picked up the biggest of the long-legged mongrels by the back of its neck and the hair near its long tail. I threw the twisting wad of fur out the temple entrance. It yelped pitifully as it bumped against an outer wall and slid down the temple's front pathway. The second dog I grabbed the same way and tossed it as far as I could. We women and the remaining dogs heard the thuds, bounces, and whines as that slobbering canine limped down through rows of our marigolds. A third dog, not quite as hefty as the other two, crouched close and snarled at me. Three young participants joined me in chasing it and the remaining curs around the sacred fertility symbol to outside.

It took us a while to care for each other after that interruption. Fancy and not so fancy saris, streaked with dirt, dog drool, and tears, needed brushing and spotting with damp rags. I'm not sure where the first aid supplies came from, but they served us well. The group dealt with scratches on ankles, arm wounds, and tear-streaked faces. We held each other's hands and several cradled one another gently. Then slowly, as breathing returned to near normal, one woman raised her head. Mari quietly shared her declaration: "Look, look at us. We're all okay!" Heads bobbed up and down. She turned to Mari and me with an expression and hand gestures that said: "Let's begin talking about what we'll do for our village's future."

Later near sunset, Mari and I checked into a wayside inn operated by an order of Catholic nuns on the road to the next day's forum. The nuns fed us steaming bowls of tasty soup and freshly baked bread. After showers, we grabbed pens and journals for debriefing and sat in one of our comfortable but modest cells.

Our reflections started with a handful of questions we asked ourselves each evening. What colors, sounds, smells, and characters do we remember from the day? We acknowledged feelings and emotions experienced. We answered

What worked well? What didn't? What did we learn? How could we change or improve as a team and as individual facilitators? And finally, we each named the day. The titles we came up with are long gone from my mind. In retrospect, "Blessed Interruptions" or perhaps simply "Marigolds" might have slipped from our lips.

After a few silent moments, I asked quietly: "Can you believe, Mari, the same wild dogs have been terrorizing our new friends for three or four years?"

"Oh, no—no, that's horrible!" Mari shook her head. "Wow, the miracle of this day was everything worked for us. Even the bloody interruption by the dogs worked in our favor. It unified the group. Without that happening, those women might have remained bogged down in ancient caste roles. Nothing like saving ourselves from being eaten alive by growling beasts to break apart centuries-old social barriers!"

Another way of thinking about the day, minus the terrifying dog interruption, led me to wonder if the women might not have worked as well together. Nor would they have produced a plan for which they appeared proud. After experiencing victory over the wild dogs, we women became no longer two caste factions plus two strangers but rather one group that built a plan. We stood in new relationships to ourselves, each other and our futures.

As for the village? All kinds of new possibilities existed. How I wished we might have learned what the women accomplished and how. For example, how long did it take to get electricity to every village dwelling? Did they succeed in finding additional sources of fresh water? I wished I could become briefly an Indian House Sparrow with its bird's-eye view of the shelter they wanted to construct for large village and women's gatherings.

Recording results and evaluating the degree to which the Global Women's Forums influenced rural development in India was never a part of our assignment. However, in no way does that mean we will forget Maharashtra village women. Remembering their creative responses to enormous challenges, as well as their tenacity, and grit continue to inspire.

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