

## Spotlight Women in India: Vulnerability and Strength



**Bernard Imhasly**

After decades of stagnation, India is now in a phase of rapid economic development. In the last twenty-five years, its economic output has nearly quadrupled. A shrinking agricultural base has triggered

a mass-migration into cities, accompanied by technological change, namely telecom and TV connectivity.

This economic reordering has brought about unprecedented social convulsions. Mobility and growth have upset traditional values and institutions and generated new economic and social aspirations.

Rapid but uneven growth has also led to a rapid expansion of inequality (the "GINI Coefficient"). This is also due to the fact that educational outcomes and health indicators have lagged behind. The distance between the reality of and the aspirations to a better life has widened, puncturing the dreams of a golden road to job security.

In this process, girls seem to fare better than boys. This is not only because they start from a lower base. Not protected by patriarchal traditions, they also grasp educational and career opportunities more eagerly.

One symptom of this combustion of crisis and opportunity is the rise in reported violent crimes against women, ever since the gang rape of a student in Delhi has caught the headlines. This young woman came from a similar background as the rapists, both having migrated from village poverty to the city, in search for better opportunities.

But otherwise she was everything that her tormenters were not: She was studying to be a medical practitioner, she had strong support from her family, she was self-assured in the way she claimed the public space of the city.

By contrast, these men were the losers in the race for jobs, relationships, security. They lived without their families in a slum, could not hold on to jobs due to illiteracy and lack of skills, they were threatened by expulsion from their illegal hutments. Some had taken to drink and drugs. They felt betrayed by the promises of the city, were without emotional moorings, loaded with resentment. This psychological constellation perhaps explains the ferocity with which these desperate men assaulted their victim.

It is still not clear whether the exponential rise in rape reports reflects an increase in these acts or is merely an expression of heightened media sensibility. There is no doubt however that many more women victims come out in the open and seek justice. And media attention reflects this new resolve and expands its visibility.

In a paradoxical way therefore, the increase in reported gang rapes also confirms the rise of women who see themselves as persons with increased autonomy and agency.



**Leader of a Sampark women's cooperative**

It has been noted above that educational outcomes among a majority of schoolchildren lag behind their potential and their aspirations. But India has reached at least the one Millennium Development Goal of near-universal school enrolment for girls.

Despite outcomes, the fact of near universal attendance has by itself shaken the traditional steel frame of a girl's life, where she was only allowed to migrate from being a family servant to that of a



**Aswathy, a Kalakshetra dance scholar, wants to become a great dancer and start an institute in Kerala to spread this art to the younger generations**

married woman. School attendance alone has the potential to make her more autonomous; it is also slowly breaking the patriarchal mould of social rules and roles, by opening up new forms of work and employment.

There are still less girls than boys moving into secondary and tertiary education. But when they do, girls perform better than their male counterparts. It is also not widely known that more young women choose engineering and information technology as their preferred course options, rather than social sciences, leave alone "domestic science". One NASSCOM report spoke of an increased "feminisation" of the IT industry.

Accelerated economic growth and progressive social legislation are the main reasons for bringing about this positive change. But civil society too can claim its share in bringing about this often painful but necessary transition. Many private initiatives focus on securing the survival of the girl child, on ensuring her health and nutrition, they prevent her from dropping out of education at an early stage. They help girls in forming their own personalities, capable of making choices, by opening up avenues other than mere housework, earning a wage, or even becoming small-scale entrepreneurs.

Dalyan is one such institution. However small its footprint in this vast and churning space, it has become part of the large chorus of voices and of the army of helping hands that emanate from it, to help the women and girls of India break through age-old discrimination and claim their rightful equality.

**Bernard Imhasly** has lived in India for thirty years, first as a Diplomat for the Swiss Foreign Service, then as a journalist, as a correspondent for the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*. Since his retirement he lives near Mumbai, represents Dalyan in India and writes a column for the Internet Webpaper [www.journal21.ch](http://www.journal21.ch).