

**50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Encyclical Letter Mater et Magistra**

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## **ASHANKUR (SHOOTS OF HOPE)**

**An effort to develop village community through  
empowering women**

**Ashankur Rural Women's Centre**

**Village Bhokar, Tal. Shirampur**

**Dist. Ahmednagar**

**Maharashtra India, 413 709**

**Phone: 02422 – 245649**

**ashankurwc@gmail.com**



**Ashankur meaning “shoots of hope”**

Dear friends, greetings from India!

I am Sr. Daphne, belonging to the Religious of the Sacred Heart Congregation . I have been working with Dalit and tribal women over the past 18 years in rural India, where 70 % of our population struggles to make a living. In this presentation I have focused on the efforts made in the light of Churches Social teaching , by the organization called Ashankur to give woman back her identity, her dignity and rights, which have been taken away from her by society for its own ends .

ASHANKUR, meaning ‘shoots of hope’, is an organization based in the drought-prone Ahmednagar District of Maharashtra State (in mid-western India), serving women, and more recently children at the margins of our society.

To understand Ashankur and its interventions, we need to understand the inspiration and vision that led to its founding.

The church from its inception is calling us to empower the powerless  
The Social teaching of the church as made us aware time and again of this mission and has invited us to participate in it actively.

*Mater et Magistra* teaches that the state has a duty to safeguard “the rights of all its people, and particularly of its weaker members, the workers, women and children.” 54 ENCICLICAL LETTER *Mater et Magistra*  
¶ 20

Contrary to this:

If one analyses the situation of woman in rural India, we find that the oppressive social, political, economic and religious processes in traditional Indian society have driven her to the point of internalizing this repressive system. Consistent internalization causes not only material impoverishment, but also leads to her marginalization in society.

In actual fact, there is tremendous innate power within woman, power that brings ‘the world into being’ and nurtures it. Through her will, service and commitment, she generates power from morning till evening for her family, community and society.

Unfortunately, her resources and energies are controlled and dissipated at every level. In a male-dominated society, her powers are often manipulated by the men-folk in her own family and community, leaving her dependent, isolated and often helpless - her power snatched from her.

This is the stark reality one encounters in the Ahmednagar District. It was in this context that Ashankur was born in 2002 as a beacon of hope, grounded on the belief that a woman who is awakened to her true identity is a woman empowered to realize her role as a spring and fountain of power for good in her family, community and society at large.

## **A. THE MARGINALIZATION OF WOMEN IN THE AHMEDNAGAR DISTRICT**

### **1. Social marginalization:**

As you are aware, the dowry system is a common practice prevalent in Indian culture, across all our religious faith traditions. The purpose of the dowry was to provide security for a girl moving into her husband's house after marriage. Depending on the local practice and the demands of her future in-law's family, she could be constrained to bring Rupees 50,000 (Euros 800) in cash, a motorbike, a TV set and other household luxury articles in kind. This dowry is not owned by her. On her wedding day itself, it becomes her family contribution to her husband's family.

The dowry system often becomes an unbearable burden on a woman due to the unreasonable demands made by her in-laws, demands that her family cannot meet. The harassment the woman faces in such circumstances becomes intolerable, leaving her helpless with no escape. The curse of the dowry system can be gauged from the reports of our District hospital, where a minimum of two burn cases are registered every month (and many often go unreported).

A second cause for social marginalization is that a woman enjoys no legal entitlement to ownership. Women, whether educated or uneducated, toil hard to earn a livelihood. In the morning and in the evening, they are busy managing household chores. During the day, they labour either on their own fields, work on someone else's field, or serve as a domestic workers. In fact, 65 to 70 % of Dalit and tribal families are female-headed due to either the husband's desertion, or to his income being spent on alcohol, drugs, gambling etc.

But what happens to her earning? It is set aside for the family and is taken for granted. As against this, she has no bank account, no title deed to her house, no property in her name. She absolutely owns nothing. Her talents and her capacities are used productively to earn the family livelihood, but she is not considered as earning member of the family. She earns, but has no right to ownership, and because there is no ownership, she becomes dependent. She internalizes the fact that her survival depends on her family and so she learns to accept without complaint whatever is demanded from her. This has gone deep into the woman's sub-conscious. She has lost her identity. Her identity is either her husband, or her husband's family.

The system of the 'money lender' is still prevalent in many of our villages. A family approaches the money lender for a variety of

emergency needs, including dowry. The whole family become bonded-labourers on his land, till they repay the loan. The heaviest price, in such cases, has to be paid by a woman or a young girl in the family, by way of sexual gratification of the moneylender. This trauma and shame is borne without a murmur, as she feels obliged to pay the debt of her family at her own cost.

## **2. Cultural Marginalization**

Culturally, the woman's dependency and submissive nature is very obvious. Traditionally, she is given no status in public. She is relinquished to the shadows, with no face or voice in her family, community, or society. A woman has to cover her head with her sari when she moves in public, or when she comes into the presence of a man or community elder. She has to walk bare-foot, carrying her sandals on her head when she passes before a temple or shrine.

## **3. Economic Marginalization**

39% of India's population live below the poverty line. This harsh situation is reflected in our District. In India, a family whose income is below Rs 18000/- (Euros 320) a year, is considered to be living below the poverty line. The basic needs of the family of five persons can barely be met with Rs 112/- (Euros 2) a day. The poorer the family, the greater is the burden on the woman of the household.

⇒ Poverty has a close relationship with caste. Dalit women rarely own any land and most of them are daily-wage agricultural labourers. Around 81% of Dalit women work as agricultural labourers and 19% as cultivators. By contrast, only 43% of non- Dalit women are agricultural labourers, and 42% are cultivators. Agricultural work is seasonal in nature, and is available only at certain times.

⇒ A family living below the poverty line receives an official Government document (card). This entitles the family to a certain quota of food-grains, and oil at concessional rates from Government-recognized grocery stores. Often the food-grains provided are of very low quality. Since these poor families have no voice, the store merchants often do not give them even half the rations that they are entitled to. The women spend lots of time and energy sifting these food-grains. Feeding on low quality food-grains, they generally suffer from malnourishment.

## **4. Socio-religious Marginalization**

At devotional places, women are prohibited from entering the mandir or sanctuary. Even in our District Churches, a menstruating woman

refrains from receiving Communion, because she has internalised the traditional perception that this is something unclean. There are many religious practices which relegate a woman to a subordinate position and role. For example, there is a Hindu religious festival “Vaterpornima” - which is celebrated everywhere by women. As a traditional practice, women wrap a string seven times around the trunk of a Banyan tree and pray to the Lord to grant her the same husband for her next seven lives! No matter how much abuse or harassment a woman endures from her husband, she blindly observes this practice.

## **5. Political Marginalization**

Women are constantly side-lined from decision-making in the family, and in her village community. But this injustice does not stop here. Often the decisions are made for her - by her elders or by the men in the house. At Ashankur, we have meetings with leaders of the women’s groups every three months. When we plan a program, especially if we decide to organise an exposure visit, no woman will give her consent to participate on the spot. She will always say, “I will ask my family and let you know”. Her decision is solely dependent on her husband granting permission to participate.

Her segregation in society allows her little or no involvement in the political forum. She is considered insignificant, and unable to think or decide on her own. Her vote is hijacked and manipulated by the so-called knowledgeable groups, that is by the men-folk! During the time of elections in the villages, the men in the family decide and direct the women which party symbol they should stamp on the ballot paper. A woman is usually not even aware of the candidate she is voting for. The same also happens with Government welfare schemes, where her signature is often misused to get maximum benefit, while leaving her empty-handed.

Two years ago, we did a quick survey of the villages after the local Government elections. We discovered that 92% of women cast their votes based on the directives given by the men-folk. When asked how they made their choice of a candidate, they replied that it was based on the decision made by their husband or brothers or village leaders. They had little or no information about the candidates standing for election in their constituency, or about the election symbols of the various candidates.

## **B. TOWARDS THE MAKING OF A WOMAN ...**

### **1. Ashankur's mission to empower women**

In spite of marginalization of women in every domain of our society, Ashankur believes there is hope and that hope emerges from the women themselves. The power within a woman cannot be enslaved for too long.

We, at Ashankur, believe that if women are organized, made aware, and equipped with the right skills, they can unleash the potential and power that lie dormant within them to overcome all obstacles and assist in building society. The integrated and sustainable development of any community or society cannot happen unless the women of that community/society are empowered.

We also believe that empowerment is not simply restricted to economic self-sufficiency, but is closely linked with human development to foster the realization of a person's capacities. Empowerment also creates an environment where persons are able to develop and apply their knowledge and skills, and to increase their potential by the exercise of active choices with regard to work, leisure, and civic rights. In the light of this belief Ashankur, has focused its efforts on the empowerment of women.

### **2. Our Objectives and Activities**

Our aim and efforts, therefore, are to facilitate change, to enable women to stand confidently on their own feet, and take decisions that concern their lives and their world. To achieve this, we focus on four areas where this change can take place:

1. Change from household seclusion to social interaction;
2. Change from the lack of control to control over resources;
3. Change from non-participation to equal rights in decision-making;  
and
4. Change from the humdrum routine of daily tasks to income-generating activities;

To achieve this, Ashankur has built up a grass-root level movement, where women initiate attitudinal change within themselves. This is facilitated by organizing them into Self-Help-Groups (SHGs). Each member of the SHG contributes Rs. 50 (80 Cent) or Rs. 25 (40 Cent) every month, based on the capacity of the group members. The group contributions are collected together and deposited in the bank. The group is taught to manage their own money, to write accounts, to go to the bank, to deposit the money, and then to start providing small loans to the group members. They learn to take decisions on how to use their own money and to support each other. This gives them tremendous joy and satisfaction of owning and deciding on the use of their earnings.

The SHGs are self-governed, and the group discusses and makes decisions about various village issues and production-oriented income-generating activities. Social interaction and sharing of resources are natural consequences of such activities, while self-reliance and a positive self-image are added advantages. Presently we have 185 Self Help Groups and 22 Women's Farmers Group, comprising a network of 5,500 women. At the Ashankur centre, we conduct various residential vocational training programs for school drop-out girls.

During these training programs, we help the participants learn more about their own strengths and sensitize them on social issues around. This program gives them self-confidence. It helps them to get out of the clutches of money lenders, build communal harmony, and minimize the evils of the caste system. Here they find a forum to express their solidarity with each other. The economic power and group support that they now come to enjoy give them dignity and bargaining power in society.

I would like to present here a case study of one of our villages. Our experience in Gujarwadi demonstrates how, if provided opportunities and a suitable environment, the power of women can transform a society.

Gujarwadi, with a population of 1,100, is one of the villages where Ashankur started working with women six years ago. The village leaders had invited Ashankur to help organize the women in the community. The first meeting was held in the evening on an open ground in front of a village house. Around 25 women attended the meeting. All sat with their backs facing me. I tried to dialogue with them. With much coaxing, two women finally spoke up. They said that they were not used to talking in public, so they would meet me in their houses. I was quite nervous and did not know how to make a start in this village. After our initial meeting, I started visiting families, and, on a couple of occasions, I stayed overnight in the village. This helped me learn a few facts.

There was a big gap between the landlords and the labourers. Just 8 families owned most of the land in the village. The rest had very small land holdings or were labourers on these fields. When in need, they borrowed money from the money-lender at the rate of 15% to 20% interest a month. Most of the community were still burdened by debts of loans they had not repaid. The women, in general, had never left their village. If they did, it was only for a big festival, when they were expected to visit their brothers, or to make a pilgrimage to a religious centre. Most of these women were uneducated. When a young girl comes to puberty, she is obliged to discontinue going to school, and her parents look for a boy to get her engaged. There was no proper sanitation in the village. Most of the women looked anaemic and malnourished.

After building a good rapport with the women, we introduced them to the concept of Self-Help-Groups. Some showed willingness; others were hesitant and frightened of what their husbands would have to say.

Initially, just eleven women were ready to try out the program. We started visiting the group every 15 days to guide them. They had to listen to many adverse remarks from other women, as well some of their family members, but they persevered. They began to speak to others about the importance of coming together and saving. After 8 months, another two groups of 15 women were formed. The caste system is strongly entrenched in the village, and the members of one of the three groups were from the lower caste. At the initial stage, it was really difficult to get them to sit together for a meeting. Sensing the tension, we planned strategies to help the lower caste women to grow in self-esteem, and to make the upper caste women understand the plight of these women.

It was a difficult task, and a slow process. However, after much struggle over a period of one and a half year, there was some acceptance of each other. Meanwhile, the internal loan system among the SHG women got operational. The men-folk of the family began to see the benefits, and more women expressed their desire to take part in the program. At the end of two years, 11 SHGs were formed, comprising 160 women.

The groups were made aware about their own dormant potential and were given information about available local Government schemes for their benefit. They were introduced to the Government Departments and officials, who were meant to serve them. Gradually they began to recognize their own resources and needs, as well as those of their village community.

With great enthusiasm these women participated in Government health and sanitation programs. They implemented projects in organic farming, planting trees, and cultivating kitchen gardens. They demanded their rights from the Government officials for proper teachers in their local Primary school. They organized the youth, and built family toilets. With loans through the SHGs, many bought cross-bred cows, which improved the economic status of their family. Once a month, they got together to clean the village, irrespective of which caste they belonged to. Moreover, the village took a resolution that no girl below the age 18 would be given in marriage.

Ashankur has taken up similar interventions in 22 other villages of the Ahmednagar District, forming a network of 7000 women, who are linked through the village leaders. These women now look at their society very differently from what they did 5 years ago, and the society also has begun to recognize their worth. This is our testimony to women's power and potential. It is a confirmation of our foundational belief in the dignity and role of women. We are witness to the miracle of transformation in this group of vulnerable, marginalized women. We have accompanied and shared their journey in realizing their identity, their dignity, and their potential. We have joined hands with them in solidarity to unleash the power within them to renew their broken lives

and their world of shadows into the image of the kingdom of hope, of promise and of light.

*The education and empowerment of women throughout the world cannot fail to result in a more caring, tolerant, just and peaceful life for all.* (Aung San Suu Kyi, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, leader of Burma's democracy movement). It is a dream we share and a commitment we make as disciples of the Lord - to create an enabling environment in our world, which offers woman the support and freedom to use to the full her potential for love and nurturing a more abundant life, which God desires for all his children everywhere.

On this occasion, I would like express my gratitude both as a woman and as a member of our universal church. The church plays a very important role in supporting the efforts of giving life to women and marginalized communities by their moral guidance and financial support. Structures like the women's cell in Catholic Bishop's Conference of India and Caritas India have contributed substantially to these efforts. In fact, our religious Congregations are working in the most remote area, where others seldom dare to venture. This is possible because of formation and support of the Church.

Sr Daphne Sequeira RSCJ