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Engendering leadership

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ENGENDERING LEADERSHIP. A CHRISTIAN FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE FROM INDIA

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Introduction

Several questions flooded my mind as I began to reflect critically on the theme of responsible leadership. *Who* is a leader? *What* is good leadership? What are the qualities that we expect or admire in leaders? What are those things that we would not an accomplished leader to be? Can an assessment of power-flow from the leader to the people be a marker to define responsible leadership? These questions are valid and necessary that one has to deal with, in order to critically and imaginatively weave a pattern of responsible leadership that would contribute to the enhancement of human dignity and wholeness in community at any given time.

1. Towards Non-Hierarchical Patterns of Leadership

What I shall do in this brief paper is to juxtapose two stories of women in leadership – one is a story from the past and the other a story from the present – to address the above questions as well as focus on engendered leadership that would lead to a transformed community. The first story is that of Miriam, the first woman in the Bible who was named as a prophet. The second story is a *collective* story of women who participated in the *Panchayati Raj* governance, in Karnataka, South India. An overview of these two stories brings to surface, issues concerned with power, control over resources, exercise of freedom with responsibility, agency over one's body, reclaiming of the power of voice and speech, and so on.

The women in these stories challenge dominant notions of leadership, and reconstruct the identity and selfhood of women in a decisive way through their leadership. These two stories present for us a challenge to search for non-hierarchical patterns of leadership, in a world where leadership is often equated with power *over* another. Let us now turn to the two stories as resource for our critical reflection on the major theme – responsible leadership.

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2. The Story of Miriam

In the second chapter of the book of Exodus (Ex) in the Bible, we first meet Miriam as a young girl who stands guard for her baby brother Moses. She seems to be a smart and courageous girl who takes a bold initiative to link her mother with the adoptive parent (Pharaoh's daughter) in a novel way. She assumes a leadership role along with her mother Jochebed, Pharaoh's daughter, the two midwives Shiphrah and Puah in challenging the mandate of Pharaoh to kill all the newborn male Hebrew children. In Ex 15:20 of the same book, Miriam is referred to as a prophet who led the *people* to celebrate their journey of liberation from the hands of Pharaoh.

It is important to note the *masculine, plural* (them) in Ex 15:21 that underlines the fact that Miriam was not just a leader of the women's wing of Israel but of the *whole people*. The significance of her role, responsibility and leadership is however undermined as she is evaluated more against the book Number (Num) 12, where she is portrayed as a power monger, as one jealous of Moses.

In most references, the names of Moses and Aaron figure as the leaders of Israel but not Miriam. Prophet Micah however does not forget to mention the name of Miriam along with Moses, and Aaron, as those sent by God to deliver the people of Israel (Micah 6:4). This is seldom uplifted as *history* that has to be celebrated. Micah who lived several centuries later than Miriam was being faithful and sensitive to the tradition that prevailed among the people who chose to remember Miriam as one among the leaders sent by God. Hence my interest to reconstruct the person and leadership of Miriam and creatively re-imagine some of the *turning point* decisions she must have made in order to challenge some of the prevalent patterns of leadership.

My feminist antenna often senses something amiss when I read in the Bible, of a woman who is either praised as wonderful or dismissed as a sinner. Both these actually reflect how far the praised women or the dismissed women chose to abide by or challenge the patriarchal social norms of that time. A good woman is often praised as one who does not transgress the boundaries of social expectations and values laid down by a patriarchal society. A bad woman is often identified as one who challenges the construct of a 'good woman' in that given culture. My interest in Miriam was especially aroused when I read of Miriam as the first prophet, as one among the three sent by God, according to Micah on the one hand and to see the haste with which common women and men tried to dissociate from Miriam because she was punished with leprosy for her audacious, jealous voice. What was the intention of the writer who uncritically narrates that Miriam alone was punished for her question of audacity? With these preliminary questions, let us turn to the story of Miriam.

We read of a severe crisis that emerged in the community of Israel during their journey in the wilderness in Num 11 where the people of Israel complain to Moses that they have not had meat for several days. Perhaps there were several 'I told you so', 'never mind', 'Old is Gold' opinions shared openly among people and with Moses in particular. Moses cannot help but turn to God saying: 'Did I give birth to these people that I have to be responsible for them?' The daily menu is monotonous! An understandable need indeed for the people, considering how important food is, to keep one's body, mind and heart as fit as possible. Num 11 tells us of a 'stranger' that kills several hundreds of people overnight, even as meat was still between their teeth! One may probably visualise a case of food poisoning, or a sudden massacre of people, or a case of people breaking into sudden communal riot that saw several dead in a short time. What interests me most is the reference to 'plague' in Num 11 as well as in Num 25, which results also in the sudden death of thousands of people. Whereas it is vague and difficult to connect a reason for the 'plague' that robbed the lives of thousands of Israelites during their journey in the wilderness in Numbers 11, the reason for 'plague' is quite clear in Num 25. Moreover the reference to the Cushite woman in Num 12 (of whom Miriam and Aaron seem to have questioned Moses about) and the incident narrated in Numbers 25 seem to have a connection!

3. 'Has the Lord Spoken Only Through You, Moses?'

The reference to developing of sexual relationships between the people of Israel and Moab is looked upon as an abomination before God. The people of Israel had a deliberate negative construction of the Moabites as the 'other' – polluting, evil, irreligious, and idol worshippers – in order to create a pure, holy, good and religious 'self' before God. Those who dared to relate to the women of other religious communities had to be taught a lesson in monotheism and monoculturism. Zimri, an Israelite man tries to be bold and defies the order of Moses who wanted all the Israelite men to give up their relationships with women from other religious communities. He takes his Midianite woman Cozbi and declares that they will remain as a couple together and enter a tent. Phineas interprets this as a revolt *against God* and kills both Zimri and Cozbi. The narrator interprets this act of Phineas as that which propitiates the wrath of a jealous God! God also seems to approve of Xenophobia, a jealous ethnic narrow minded God fashioned according to the mind of the powerful, including Moses.

It is here that I imagine the role of Miriam, a senior leader, a woman, who probably challenged Moses very strongly on his stand on interrace, inter-caste, interreligious, inter-cultural marriage and

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relationship. Moses himself had chosen to marry a Midianite, and befriend also another woman of Cushite origin, a woman of colour. I can imagine Miriam as one who would have been terribly disturbed to see the fellow-women of other religious communities and cultural traditions bearing the brunt of violence because they were looked upon as source of evil and source of temptation for a normal Israel male Jew.

I cannot ignore the incident narrated in Num 25 when I read the story of a 'jealous' Miriam in Numbers chapter 12! Num 12 has such an abrupt beginning, citing Miriam and Aaron who were upset with Moses about the Cushite woman whom he had married. It shows *Miriam and Aaron* in a poor light as xenophobic individuals! It also offers a traditional patriarchal explanation of 'a woman against another woman' to legitimise the violence against women that occurs within a patriarchal society. I admire Miriam for the supposedly audacious question that she and Aaron put to Moses, namely, 'Has the Lord spoken only through you, Moses?' (Num 12:2) I consider this as a perfectly normal and necessary question to be raised within a democratic system. Then why was Moses upset? Why was it interpreted as Miriam kindling God's wrath and God's intervention being necessary to support Moses and punish only Miriam with leprosy? What is the implication of this message for women, especially for those in leadership? While it was all right for Moses to exercise his own choice to marry a Midianite and a Cushite (both foreign wives), why and how can he suddenly become so closed-minded and xenophobic when it comes to understanding other people's life, sex and sexuality?

4. Five Markers of Responsible Leadership

Even though Aaron and Moses reportedly plead with God to be merciful and patient with Miriam, it seems that her irreversible punishment has to be borne in silence. She is shut out of the community for a week because of her leprosy, a social disease just as much as a physical disease. What fascinates me is the fact that the people of Israel refuse to move on in their journey without their leader Miriam. This is an affirmative action on the part of the people to acknowledge Miriam as truly *their* leader. I would like to list below, what I find as fundamental markers of responsible leadership:

1. Responsible leadership should always be rooted in justice: A good leader is one who is bold and courageous to raise his/her voice in the face of injustice done to a fellow-human in community. A good leader is empathetic in approach and feels the pain experienced by others as one's own. This sensitivity to experience the pain and

failures of others as one's own, is a rich gift from God. This response-ability is congruous with responsibility.

2. A responsible leader does not seek glory for oneself in the process of struggling with people for justice. Leadership is not a moment of exercising power over another. Neither is it an opportunity to prove one's self-righteousness at the cost of the institution or of a community to which one belongs. A responsible leader does not seek one's own glory at the cost of a community. Rather s/he regards leadership as a God-given responsibility to enable every one in the community to mutually influence another to experience the richness of love and fellowship in community.
3. A responsible leader cannot be defined in terms of one's talents alone. Responsible leadership does not lie in the individual capability of a person to carry out tasks. It depends on the support and co-operation of people in the community. 'A Responsible Leader' is a *certificate* that *people* ought to give to a leader, based on the way they experience his/her leadership.
4. Responsible leadership means readiness to suffer ridicule, rejection or punishment for the sake of justice. At times, criticism and rejection may come from unexpected quarters. Rather than withdrawing from the scene of chaos and difficulties, a responsible leader is expected to bounce back with enthusiasm to sustain the spirit and resistance of the people.
5. A responsible leader does not hesitate to be open to criticism. Good leadership does not mean that there will be no opposition. A test of leadership means including the space for another to critique the leader as well as the structure and system. It is not easy for a leader to find the needed energy to be constantly open for criticism, while at the same time strive for newness and new vision.

Gleaning through the material in hand of the portrait of Miriam from the Hebrew Scriptures, we can identify the above characters and qualities that Miriam showed in her life as a leader and a prophet among the people of Israel. If the story of Miriam being punished with leprosy was used to condemn Miriam and shun her into oblivion, I see in this very story of punishment of Miriam, a bold Miriam, who did not hesitate to voice her question, plain and straight, to Moses, a fellow leader and a younger brother! The punishment she received from 'God', I see as a 'punishment designed by a patriarchal male' to caution any woman, every woman, about questioning a male about his status before God. I see in the punishment of Miriam a threat to all women, to abide by the limitations prescribed by the patriarchal society or be ready to face any punitive action.

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That which makes me identify in Miriam a popular leader, is the act of the people following her experience of being alienated from them. The common people for generations together did not allow this incident of ‘punishment with leprosy’ to eclipse the service and leadership of Miriam which they had experienced. This long remembered tradition by the people is what Micah picks up and does not cut out her name as one of those God sent to liberate the people of Israel from bondage. Miriam thus stands tall as a responsible leader in her community and as an example for us who search for non-hierarchical patterns of leadership.

5. Women in Panchayati Raj: Local Governance

The second story that I have to share is from my socio-political-cultural-religious-economic context of India. It is about common women who experienced a dramatic change in their life, when they were elected to become members and leaders in village governing councils or the *gram panchayats*. I am referring to the *Panchayati Raj* system that was introduced in India as an initiative to reserve at least 33 % of seats for women to participate in the local governance in villages. After experimenting on the process of getting 33 % of women into leadership and decision-making levels in southern state of Karnataka (1987-1992), the historic 73rd amendment to the Constitution of India was made on April 24, 1993 to initiate the same in every state in India. *Panchayat* means village and *Raj* means rule. Of the 14,000 women who were elected as members and leaders on the village councils, at least 80 % were new comers into politics. By 1994, the total number of women elected rose to 330,000! Truly a revolution was underway.

Following the election, the elected women were willing to be trained in leadership, in gender awareness, in learning to reconstruct their selves as women who had a task, a responsibility and a calling. They had to put up with nasty and snide remarks from women and men about their newfound identity. Deviramma, a 50 year-old woman from the ‘Golla’, or cowherd community, who kept cattle and sold curd for livelihood became a member of village council and subsequently, the president of her village council in December 1993. She narrates her experience thus:

If we are outspoken, they – the men – call us brazen and dub us shameless. But now we don’t care because we know we have access to people who will have to hear us. The day we have our *Gram Panchayat* meeting, the men and the people at home mock us – that’s when we bring out books and show them what we know...¹

Another woman named Sibamma, a Dalit woman who became an articulate leader in a village council, narrates her experience thus:

The men have always ridiculed us, and perceived us as incapable of the management of public affairs. We now make up one third of the councils. This adds to our sense of strength. We must be 50 percent or more. We must overpower them with our numbers.²

Women have thus changed the political process. They have also reformulated the priorities of governance based on the needs of the community. It has converted grass-root leadership to state level leadership. At least 75 % of the elected women were below 45 years of age. Most of the women elected were illiterate and had no prior political experience. In some cases, these women defeated renowned, experienced politicians and one of them was even beaten up because it was too much of a humiliation for the party workers of the male politician. Ratnaprabha who was one of those beaten up for the 'crime' of outwitting a male politician says thus:

Whenever there is any tension in the villages, they come to me and I have learnt how to sort out the problem. Many people have realised that it is indeed a waste of time to make a complaint to the police station...³

Ratnaprabha had studied only up to 7th grade in school. As an elected *panchayat* leader, she launched programmes for adult education, dug wells for drinking water and focused on repairing school buildings.

Thus the elected women joined together and worked as a team, across party lines. They changed the nature of local village governance and thus carried the spirit into the state governance. *Panchayati Raj* was a success story of grass-root women in Indian context. They gave priority to everyday issues of life, like access to clean drinking water, putting an end to the alcohol menace and liquor consumption of their husbands who did not bring their salaries home. The women together decided to close the door on every drunken husband! Women also realised that their health was also an important aspect. Such a linking between women's health, development, survival issues, addressing violence against women brought about a new perspective to life, to governance and the emergence of new self of a woman.

6. Engendering Leadership as a Faith Mandate

The two stories that I have shared above are powerful stories of life. If one feels threatened by the power of redefining leadership in these two stories, there is a possibility of the following accusations

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and responses: a) Scepticism; b) Making too much of too little; c) Romanticising of women's leadership; d) Faithful to the verbal inspiration of the Bible and hence no space for life-affirming interpretations. I can imagine a positive response, too from sections of a community who would be energised to hear these positive stories of women and their experiences in leadership, and would acknowledge the success story of women in grass roots as women who have a lot to contribute to this world. The experience of women elected to become important members and leaders of the *Panchayati Raj* may be identified as phenomenal and transformative followed by an affirmation that these women could be the agents of change who could offer us alternatives for a better and a new world.

Engendering leadership is not an option. It needs to be affirmed as a faith mandate. If only this could be applied to the situation of women in the Church, then women and men should first of all be given equal power and responsibility beginning at the grass local church level.

Engendering leadership means a fundamental affirmation in the equality of women and men as those created in the image of God, regardless. It is that critical faith response to put into practice the meaning of this core, non-negotiable principle that we, as women and men, are equal before God, and are called to various forms of ministry, irrespective of our gender, sex and sexuality. There should be no power on earth, or barrier, structure, individual or ideology to take away this basic gift of God to the whole humanity.

Engendering leadership is an opportunity to be a step closer to the heart of God who has created this world out of love. To recognise the image of God in the other, and respect the other to be truly equal is to live out the value in the reign of God. Someone once said, leadership is a verb. I do believe that leadership can only be a lived out experience. It is not a quality that one possesses. It is a gift from God that we can cherish, a gift that can be nourished and nurtured through relationships in community. Such a leadership can be best compared with the image of the body that St. Paul addresses in I Corinthians 12 where there is absolute equality of every single part of the body. An affirmation of the Body stands at the root of our struggles for justice and liberation. Exercising responsible leadership is yet another opportunity and an invitation that God extends to every member of humanity to mutually love and affirm one another.

NOTES

¹ Sharita Rai *et al.*, 'Grassroots women', in: *The Indian Express*, March 5. 1995.

² *Ibidem.*

³ *Ibid.*