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PATIENCE – A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

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I am happy to contribute an article to the publication ‘*Global Ethics for Leadership*’ as a way of celebrating the growth and achievement of Globethics.net as a movement, linking individuals and institutions as a global community, and committed to a set of common ethical principles. I attended the founding conference of Globethics.net held in Geneva, Switzerland in 2004, and I remember being overwhelmed by the richness of the conference and the farsighted vision, objectives and goals set for Globethics as a global network by its founder and the participants. The present status and statistics of achievements of Globethics indicate the pace at which the network has grown as a community. The infancy period of Globethics.net seems to have been quite short; perhaps Globethics’ ‘baby’ was born with legs ready to walk! I think it is the keyword of ‘*sharing*’ that put Globethics on this fast track of growth as a movement. Globethics.net deserves a note of appreciation for discerning this demand in society and responding to that urgent need to unite the global society as a ‘community’ seeking commonality, equity and justice. In this article, I would like to reflect on the significance of ‘Patience’ as a value and a virtue for global leadership.

25.1 Patience: Redefining the Meaning of ‘Value’ in a Value

The word ‘Patience’ comes from the Latin word ‘*pati*’ which means suffering; ‘*pati*’ is also the common root for other words like Patient. Synonyms for the word ‘Patience’ include long suffering, forbearance, endurance, and so on. In the 17th century, the Puritans decided to turn the word Patience into a feminine name. When viewed from a gender perspective, it does not seem an accident in the game of patriarchy, to turn ‘Patience’ into a feminine name, because of the familiar paradigm of constructing sexist and gender stereotypes as a way of reducing a human to a commodity. The idea of ‘an ideal woman’ as “long suffering, patient, enduring woman” has to be defined, neatly packaged, decoratively advertised and sold as a product in the global (Moral!) market. One of the common ways in which patriarchy is perpetuated for generations is by *defining* an ideal female body, *constructing* a myth to legitimize that logic, and by *controlling* the meaning and potential of a woman’s body by using it as a private and public ‘site’ to inscribe values that can be publically defined, described, (de)valued by the patriarchal gaze and even assign women to guardians of these values, in order to ensure that margins and meanings perpetuate patriarchal culture!

I swiftly continued my search for the meaning of the word ‘Patience’ in the Greek New Testament as the next step and *sat stunned* at the alternative meaning and reflection that I could offer to understand Patience as a value. Let me briefly state three points before we engage in this exercise. Firstly, the term Patience cannot be defined or described as a value in itself. It has to be located in a context, as a concrete experience of an individual, collective or a community before redeeming what we can salvage as a “global value”. Secondly, it is important to simultaneously engage in a task of critiquing, correcting and (re)constructing of the meaning of Patience, at any given time. Consciously or unconscious-

ly, we prefer to analyze the problems from all angles but seldom search for options of being different. Thirdly, there is meaning in offering a value as of global importance only when the discourse is accompanied by prior commitment to acknowledging and affirmation of our utter common equality in human worth, of our inter-webbedness and inter-connectivity in this struggle to establish this commonality and equality. This means that there is a precondition of commitment to “community” before we talk about communitarian values rooted in justice.

In this exercise of searching for the meaning of ‘Patience’ in the Greek New Testament, I was led to the Greek word: ‘*makrothumia*’, which is a combination of two separate words makro + thymia, which means long + anger. It implies that there is a sufficient long pause, an amber sign of ‘wait’ before deciding to express one’s anger. It could be described as “long-tempered” (the word does not exist, but...) as against a more familiar and accepted use of the term: “short tempered”. This means that primarily, there *is* legitimacy for the emotion of anger that rises in one’s body, mind and soul, to be expressed in public. Patience does not mean swallowing one’s pain, pathos and humiliation forever. There is no reference to “counting ten” before expressing (exploding with) one’s dissent/ anger. *Makrothumia* seems to hold a powerful meaning and message to rewrite, redefine and redeem the meaning of the term Patience.

When attempting to locate this definition of *makrothumia* in a larger perspective and context, several questions come to the fore. For example: Who has the right to decide how long is long enough? What do we do about the perpetuation of sexism, racism, casteism and other ‘isms’ combined when generations of people have been silenced, and robbed them of their right to express their anger? Let me link the ‘personal and the political’, the ‘ecumenical and the economics’, the ‘social and structural’ and locate the search for the meaning of the term patience, and rearticulate those questions from a gender perspective. Perhaps an ex-

ample for each of these would help in unpacking the meaning of Patience as a value, from the underside.

25.2 Linking the Personal and the Political

For centuries, the violence of racism, casteism, sexism and ethnocentrism has continued unabated, though there is variation in terms of intensity and frequency. The common binding factor that undergirds all the above mentioned 'isms' and ideologies of power is Patriarchy. When we use 'experience of violence' as a lens to view the common experiences of Dalits, Women, the indigenous, the enslaved, and the colonized, we find that the anger and passion for justice and freedom from violence simmers in the hearts and minds of individuals and community for generations but they have not had the power to voice out their cry. It is important to state what cannot be confused with the character of Patience, even as we unlearn and relearn the meaning of Patience. In other words, the meaning of Patience has to be located in the context of "experience" before redeeming only that which is helpful to affirm the human being as a whole person, deemed fully human, restored with full human dignity.

'Patience' is not a value when one is forced to be patient because of one's helplessness, hopelessness and powerlessness: There is nothing redeemable as value when one is forced into silence, and that silence is legitimized and praised as an ideal character of the individual or a community. Very often, patriarchy gets perpetuated from generation to generation in the form and framework of a compliment. "Oh how patient you are! You are so understanding, so enduring." It is not that one loses the ability to receive compliments when one thinks along gender-justice lines. "Why do you have to suspect even a straightforward and simple compliment!?" When stereotypes are constructed along patriarchal lines, we need to realize that the goal is not aimed towards justice but towards

perpetuation of hierarchy and gender-inequality. On the other hand, if the compliment: “You are so patient” comes to a woman who has been a victim of domestic violence and abuse, and when she decides that she has held on to her anger “long enough” but cannot wait any longer to voice her demand for justice and restitution, she is redefining the meaning of “patience” and the gender-sensitized society may be guided towards the formation of a gender- sensitized community.

25.3 Linking the Ecumenical and Economics

I would like to see the term ecumenical (*oikoumene*) to be first of all redeemed as a term to refer to the whole household rather than in the narrow sense of its use in the Christian circles. Ecumenical space is that global space, bringing together all people of God, of the whole inhabited earth. As the earth’s resources and the health of the environment not only connects all but affects all, it is important for us to confess our common habitat and common household as that which makes us a family and a community. The idea of all people in this world as a Community, should be affirmed and acknowledged as Gift from God. The way we share our resources and live as a community has a lot to do with our exercise of rights and human dignity. It is important therefore to link the ecumenical and the economics before we look further into the understanding of Patience as a right, and as a value/ virtue.

‘Patience’ cannot be defined as a value in itself but understood only in a context: A whole community could be looked upon as “feminized” body and “genderized” body when they are treated as a female body collective. For example, the people in North East of India are voicing out their collective pain and pathos in the way they have been narrated in, narrated out, narrated about in Indian national history. Their experience of longtime struggle to get the abusive Armed Forces Special Power Act or AFSPA, out has not yet worked, despite the reality of from

Sharmila fasting for fourteen years. How long is long enough? Who has to be patient? What do we do if the language of patience is understood and interpreted as the normal, natural and ideal character of a people of North East India?

While this example is helpful to understand how a whole community can be perceived as ONE individual female-feminized body, it also unravels the ugly face of the patriarchal masculinized ONE body that seeks to rape the community into submission and subordination. We also see how the impunity enjoyed by perpetrators of this violence is continuous with the colluding silence of the spectator Non-North East India majority who feign helplessness and voicelessness, and expect the people of North East India to find the courage, nerve, strength and hope to rise up and speak for themselves?

'Patience' as value that we seek, cannot be equated with putting up with the imagined helplessness of the 'mute spectator' category. The long silence that the marginalized offer before rising up as one, to counter this violence, is actually the grace time offered to the Spectator community and the Oppressor Community, to realize the continuation of structures and isms that perpetuate injustice. Patience, long suffering, endurance can be affirmed as a character and value if it has the power to make the unrepentant mute spectator majority and the power-wielding patriarchal state machinery to renounce their grip from the throat of the North East Indian collective. Irom Sharmila is patient, several women who have been victims of rape and abuse are patient, and are holding on to their simmering anger and hope that in this space and time, there will be a change in structures, powers and laws, so that the dignity of people, especially those whose history, experiences and bodies are unwritten from history or distorted in history, are recounted from the perspective of the vanquished.

25.4. Linking the Local and the Global

If there is a study done on different global movements and struggles for change, we notice a common language engaged in the form of protests, marches, sit-ins, speeches, etc. One can clearly connect the dots of familiarity and see a pattern emerging when the ‘experience of violence’ is used as a lens. Who defines violence, and who has the right to define how long is ‘long’ before one has the right to express anger. Is there a “civilized” and sanitized way of expressing anger, that will convey the simmering passion and anger for justice? What is patience as a value in such a context? As a feminist-activist-Dalit-theologian, I cannot but bring together incidents of violence faced by the Tribal Christian community in Kandhamal Orissa, in India, the people who fought for their rights, dignity and safety from Nuclear Power reactors in Koodangulam in Tamilnadu, the long wait for justice for the mass murder of Dalit women and children in Bhatani Tola, Bihar, India, the painful history of torture, murder, lynching and shooting of individuals and collectives like Emet Till, Mike Brown, Eric Garner, Tamira Rice, Freddie Gray and several others. The common pattern that emerges is the forced silence and experience of helplessness, hopelessness and powerlessness of the victims, the silence of the “mute-imagined helpless-majority and the supremacists (white, brahminic, hierarchical force in every level).

In all these experiences of people, we do not need to search for any character of patience to emulate because this experience of inability to act, react, and show one’s depth of hurt and humiliation, is an experience of powerlessness, hopelessness and helplessness and cannot be understood as Patience. For Patience to be understood and regarded as a global value, the individual and collective experiences of helplessness, hopelessness and powerlessness should be turned into a potential dynamic anger and passion for justice in those who were the mute-spectator majority, against those who perpetuate these systems of injus-

tice, overtly and covertly. In order that this replication and multiplying of anger that is experienced in the hearts, minds and bodies of the marginalized should be born, nourished and sustained in the bodies, minds and hearts of the mute-spectator majority first, and the violators too.

I do not intend to meander into some idealistic notion of justice. However, I am sure that this would contribute to unmasking of claims, local and global, of many programs, projects and priorities that are underway in the name of Dalit, Women, Human Liberation. Patience is a quality and character that has the potential to unmask powers and lay bare, the pseudo voices of solidarity and support offered by the mute-spectator majority- who prefer to maintain and sustain the powers of race-caste-gender.

In conclusion, may I say that the primary and undergirding principle to affirm Patience as an incredible global value and virtue can happen when every individual's potential and right to be fully human—regardless of one's color, gender, race, religion and sex—is acknowledged, affirmed and accorded.