

Two stories, both true. I am searching for answers to the questions they raise.

ONE

I remember the day when Minu came to work for us. Her mother brought her to our home. 'Minu will work at your home' she said in a hesitant tone. Minu, a young girl, about eighteen then, smiled nervously. Minu was the eldest daughter, her mother explained; she had a younger sister, Sonu. The youngest sister, four years younger than Sonu, was a slow learner. Minu's mother was worried about her daughters' future. Minu's father worked as a casual labourer with a building contractor. So they lived on a paltry income. Minu's job was to look after our grand-daughter. 'She would do it well' her mother assured us.

Minu did her job well. Our grand-daughter loved her company and played with her. Minu was studying in the 11th standard, thanks to free education for girls. She taught many children's songs to our grand-daughter. Whenever we went out we took Minu along with us. While all was well we used to feel that her heart was not in the work she was doing.

Whenever went to a mall, Minu would put the little one in the trolley and move her. On one such day she came up to me and asked me to push the trolley. She went to another counter to meet a young sales girl. 'She is my friend' Minu said, 'She is also my neighbour.' I noted that Minu avoided taking care of our grand-daughter till we cleared our bill and moved out of the store. She did not want to be seen as our grand-daughter's caretaker, it was obvious.

On our way home everybody noticed that Minu's mood had changed. She was upset about something; we could only guess the reason. She remarked that she may not come to work the next day. Minu did not come the next day. She called up to inform that she was not well, but my wife understood the 'game' and spoke to her mother. 'She wants a job in a mall like her friend and she does not want to work as a domestic help anymore' her mother explained.

'So will she not work for us from tomorrow?'

'I have told her that she will have to work for you,' her mother continued, 'young girls get carried away by the razzle-dazzle of a mall. Girls from poor families fall prey easily. You meet all kinds of people in a mall. I know of some girls getting misled. I don't want that to happen to my daughter. I am also going to get her married soon.'

Minu reluctantly returned to work. It was a sad day for her. I asked her about the discussion with her mother. It took some effort to get her to speak. I told her that we would ensure that she was educated till graduation. She could find a good job for her then.

But it did not cheer up Minu. She said, 'I like your family but my dream is to work in an industry. I do not wish to work as a domestic help. My mother does it and I hate it. Unlike her I am educated. She is in a hurry to get me married. I know that I will not be able to go against the wishes of my parents. She has found a match for me. He works as a peon in a small office, and he is employed through a contractor. That means I will have to work as a maid to supplement earning. I just do not know how to come out of this system!'

TWO

'Things are getting out of control,' my friend complained. He was Factory Manager of a big organisation at Pune. 'These seven workers are not reporting to work for the last one month.'

'So what's your problem?'

'They are creating problems for me. They are now leading their union and they are also about to form unions in other companies.'

'Ask them to go away if they don't want to work' I said.

'No. They do not want to resign. They are asking a hefty amount to be paid for golden handshake. You know how difficult it is to dismiss a worker even for absenteeism. They will foment trouble in the factory on some pretext and bring work to a halt if I dismiss them.'

'I understand. Tell me how they are able to make a living if they are not working.'

'Don't you know what is happening in this area?'

'No. What's that?'

'The real estate builders are acquiring land at exceptionally high prices. These land holders have become multi-millionaires overnight! They really do not know what to do with that money. But they certainly know that they do not want to work anymore. They were poor, lived below poverty line for generations, and now they are rich, they are suddenly in the "nouveau riche" class!

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These are two true stories. They tell one of the major social dilemmas before us. There are many girls like Minu who are struggling to break away from shackles of traditions and suppression. They are not necessarily to be found in poor families, girls in IT industry also find weight of traditions very suffocating.

And there are some lucky ones who are seeing a big leap forward in social status during their lifetime. They must not be lured by temptations; they must learn how to increase their wealth. This is not easy for those who have been deprived of basic necessities of life for generations. Yet again IT industry has shown the golden day to many a family....the children of illiterate persons are now going abroad, earning handsome salaries and sending home an amount their parents have not received in many years.

This is life, wherever you go, in every country, but I think it is more true of India – you are torn between extremities and polarities. Finding a balance is the key. Taking charge of one's own life is the greatest need of the hour in this world of maddening change. Henry Miller says it well "Unless we become our own leaders, content to be what we are in the process of becoming, we shall always be servitors and idolaters."

We will have to find OUR way.

We will!

Vivek