

Knowing how to read the wallpaper

I used to pass through the village like a tourist – admiring the variety of sights and sounds, the colour, the amount of life lived on the street. It was like looking at a bright wallpaper. But I can't do that happily now because I know too much. I "read" the wallpaper.

The villages I walk through are each within one or two kilometres of one another on the outskirts of Bangalore city in south India, some commercialised and some still rural.

At a water tap women stand with the yellow and green plastic water-pots that have replaced the traditional brass – red saree, blue, floral, another red. Of course, it's women standing and women who will carry the heavy load. Well, let me be fair. Things are changing. Men carry pots too, these days. But there's a difference. Men bring a bicycle and carry six pots slung around it to ease the burden and finish the job quickly. Women carrying are usually stuck with one 15 kg pot at a time on head or hip, back and forth, back and forth.

A group of boys playing volleyball. Good – young people need games and exercise. What are the girls doing? No games for the girls? Nothing. They are never seen playing games.

Oh, I see some girls there. They're carrying their younger siblings.

More girls come by from a further village, returning their goats and sheep after the day's grazing. Of course, that's work for old people and teenage girls. Boys have to go to school.

I've come to a construction site now. Women work hard here carrying dishes of concrete, concrete blocks and sand, and get paid more than they used to. Their wages have gone up from 40 to 75 rupees a day. Men on the same site stand at the top of the chain gang and put the blocks in place. They get 150 rupees a day.

Wait, here's something for young women – I have reached one of the six new nursing colleges on the way out from the city. Scores of young women and some young men train to be nurses. I hear the high number of training institutions is because of the demand for nurses in the Gulf, and that these young people will head overseas. But why? Parents invest in their training so they can send them off to earn and remit money back to them in India. So that's why they get the opportunities! For whose benefit is the education then?

I head back to the Theological College where I teach mostly single and married men, with wives looking after the children.

The college welcomes women students. A single women's hostel, built nine years ago, has rooms for 22. There have never yet been more than 14 young women. There were only two new girls this year. What's the problem? Parents. They will pay for their son's further theological education but few pay for a daughter's. That would waste money. Anyway, our college offers Master's degrees after earlier study, and everyone knows one must not let a daughter reach 24 still unmarried.

"Girls don't need Bible training," parental thinking goes. "People might say they are not 'home-makers' when you are arranging their marriage." But aren't women needed to reach out to women? "Yes, but let someone else do that."

It's a bit like the ancient Vedic saying, "Let a girl be born, but let her be born in someone else's house." Population statistics reflect that – more males than females, especially aged under ten, since the widespread use of ultrasound technology, and termination of female foetuses.

There are so many ways of keeping women down.☹

Beulah Wood has been in and out of India for 40 years, and longs for change for women and men whose family life is damaged by the traditional system.

