



BOOK REVIEW

'Kinaron Par Ugti Pehchan'

(Identity on the Fringes of Society)

by Maya, Shanti, Abha

Editor: Abha Bhaiyya

Rajkamal Prakashan, 1996, Rs.80

Review: Deepa Agarwal

THE single woman and her tribulations are not often made the object of a separate study. While women's problems in general have received plenty of attention, this particular section and its special difficulties had not been brought to public notice as much as it ought to have been. The book *Kinaron Par Ugti Pehchan* is the result of a study undertaken by *Jagori*, a group which devotes itself to spreading awareness and education among women belonging to the poorer sections of society. Conscious of this lack of information about the lives and problems faced by single women, the group began the Ekal Aurat (Single Woman)-Action Research Project in 1988. This book contains the findings of that study. As the writers point out in the introduction, these women are particularly marginalised and their peculiar problems deserve special attention.

The book has been divided into three parts. The first places the study in context. The second contains the biographies of seven single women of different ages, with different reasons for being single. It also includes a summing up of their separate as well as their united

struggle for survival, (with the assistance of the group) and the questionnaires that were used. The third part shares the result of a survey which introduces the reader to the colony in which these women live—Dakshinpuri, one of Delhi's many resettlement colonies and also gives statistics gleaned from the questionnaires. One of the first things the writers point out is the stereotyped image of the single woman in society—in this case the woman, who usually for reasons beyond her control, but often out of choice, is living on her own. She may be living alone with her children, with her parental family or with her in-laws. In our country, especially among the poorer classes, it is unusual to find a woman who remains unmarried out of choice. The authors say that there are two categories in which a single woman generally finds herself placed, that of the '*bechari*' that is one who is to be pitied, like a widow or an abandoned wife or a prostitute, that is, any woman who openly has a relationship with a man other than her husband. She is rarely empathized with as an individual with problems peculiar only to herself or with a desire to

lead a life integrated with the rest of the people living around her.

The most telling statement in the book, which delineates the reason why these women are in this particular predicament, to my mind is, "*Shaadi ek suvidha va satta dene wali sanstha hai*, “-(marriage is an institution designed to give power to and for the convenience of the male). Hence, these women who head their own households and manage their own lives have to battle to find their very feet since they are, in a sense, rebels who have flouted societal norms.

It is almost as if they cannot live within the bounds of marriage they have no right to live. Opposition from parents, in-laws, society in general—even their own children—makes their struggle doubly painful. And yet, these women with little or no education have survived with dignity, sometimes finding strength in themselves, sometimes in the group with which they have come to be associated. They are widows, abandoned women, or women who have voluntarily left their husbands. They have been deprived of their children by scheming in-laws and lovers, been beaten, threatened but they have

kept their heads above the water. They live under great stress—to earn their livelihoods and provide for their children, to provide a roof above their heads, to be exemplary mothers, to keep their character unblemished.

Which brings us to another important statement made in the book, that marriage is an institution designed to curb a woman's sexuality. That is why nuns and *sadhavis* are given the highest position in society as women who have voluntarily renounced sex. Married women come next because their sexuality is controlled by men. Widows and abandoned women are objects of pity, as long as they keep themselves free from sexual entanglements but are not universally condemned. However, prostitutes and women who have relationships outside marriage are reviled by one and all.

In the introduction the authors say that the purpose of the research was to understand the hidden issues in women's lives and to examine them jointly, also to take up the issue of women's sexuality separately from the myths and false notions that surround it. The question that a woman is not supposed to have a life separate from her husband's, that her sexual desires are to be burnt or buried with her has been raised many times in the book in talks with the women whose biographies have been given. Women's longing, their unfulfilled desires, lesbian relationships, even sexual reactions which transcend taboos, like in the case of Bhanwari who found herself aroused when her son lay down next to her to warm her when she was shivering with fever have been frankly and sympathetically discussed. Women's right to sexual

expression, beyond being a passive receptacle, has been upheld.

The biographies serve a double purpose. They provide specific material for the study and they can also act as inspirational role models to others trying to find their way. The courage of all the women is remarkable. Since they have learned to survive without men, they are in a position to provide support to others similarly placed and often do so. Yet ironically enough, though they have rejected marriage, they do not want their daughters to remain unmarried. They view their singleness as their failure. However, Nafisa, a 26 year old, who has abandoned her husband and is trying to open a beauty parlor to support herself, does say that marriage means total surrender and she would not like to marry again.

Though at times the language does wax too lyrical, which does not seem to go with the subject matter at hand because it unnecessarily romanticizes the whole exercise, this is a remarkable study which makes a powerful impact. More so probably because of the deep involvement of the authors with their subjects. The group was associated with the women over a long period of time. They helped Parmeshwari, one of them, to rescue her son from her in-laws, assisted Panni in reaching a decision about what to do about her lover's baby when he was threatening to take it away and set Nafisa's husband right, when he was troubling her. The women themselves come alive as strong individuals with decided and non-conventional views, like Bhanwari's comment on prostitutes, that "they also work for their living." They are smart enough to use whatever means they can to protect themselves, like bindis and *sindoor*

to ward off the advances of lecherous employers or Parmeshwari hiding the ration card from her in-laws when they want to sell the *jhuggi* over her head. What is particularly touching are the deep ties they have formed amongst themselves so they all act as a highly effective support group.

Even more important are the conclusions that have been reached on how the lot of single women can be improved. The group has learned how important it is to have economic aid available for such women. They are thinking in terms of bank loans for single women, pensions for abandoned women, the need to recognize women as heads of the household, guardians of their children, register land, houses and ration cards jointly in men and women's name so that a woman's claim is also recognized as co-owner of her dwelling place of which no one can dispossess her at will.

As a document of the single woman's struggle to survive, her self denial, her sorrow and her deprivation and the fact that she receives little or no aid from society, the book has great value. It has been put together in a way that puts the problems of the single woman in contrast to the married one, Living outside the boundaries of marriage, on the fringe of society, has been recognized as a separate entity and her problems given much needed attention. □

When You Write to Us

In all your correspondence with Manushi, including your subscription renewals please write your full address in block letter **clearly**. This helps us respond to you promptly.