

THIS is the story of Paramjit Kaur, alias Darshana, who died of burns in house No. 2685, Bhatinda, the residence of her husband Avtar Singh. When we read about the case, we constituted an enquiry commission to investigate it. The commission consisted of Balwant Singh, president of Punjab human rights committee, Ved Parkash Gupta of the PUCL, Gurjant Singh, an advocate, Hukam Chand Sharma and Jagrup Singh, both municipal commissioners.

On the basis of extensive enquiries, the commission collected the following facts. Paramjit was married to Avtar Singh on September 30, 1976. Two months after the marriage, her in-laws started demanding more dowry. She managed to satisfy the first demand for Rs 3,000 but was unable to meet the next demand for Rs 15,000, so she was ill treated and turned out of the house in September 1978.

Paramjit went to her parents at Mansa and there filed a suit claiming maintenance. Her husband filed a petition for restitution of conjugal rights but this suit was dismissed with costs. About seven months ago, Paramjit's father-in-law Pritam Singh went to her parents' house and brought her back with him, giving an assurance that she would be treated well. However, her in-laws once more maltreated her and forced her to go back to her parents. A week before her death, her father-in-law had once again brought her back, giving another assurance of good treatment.

On September 27, 1982, at about 7 p.m., Paramjit was beaten up by her husband and her in-laws. She tried to run out of the house but the gate was blocked by her sister-in-law, who dragged her back into the house with her brother-in-law's help. The neighbours' children who were watching television in the house of Pritam Singh, were witnesses to this scene. Some of them told their parents, who thereafter kept a close watch on the house.

Paramjit's cries of "*Bachao, bachao...*" were heard at about 9 p.m. Some of those who heard her cries tried to find out what was going on, but the door was not opened to them. Some others thought it was part of the routine maltreatment of Paramjit and so ignored it. The evidence available

Mobilizing Against Dowry Murders

showed that Paramjit had received burn injuries before 10 p.m. that day. When she was admitted into the emergency ward, the doctors noted in their report that her body and clothes were smelling of kerosene. The hospital authorities informed the police but no case was registered and no investigation undertaken by the police. In her dying declaration recorded by a judicial magistrate, Paramjit allegedly stated that she had caught fire accidentally. Paramjit's in-laws reportedly went around the locality, threatening the residents and warning them not to speak to anyone about the burning incident. Her in-laws



Paramjit's burnt body

also tried to prevent the post mortem being done, but this attempt was foiled by the intervention of some citizens.

The commission has concluded that this case should have been immediately registered and investigated by the police. Paramjit's dying declaration may be produced by the defence as evidence in court, but in itself it was not ground enough for the police to close the case at

the preliminary stage, ignoring all the other evidence available. The commission also concluded that the burning of Paramjit Kaur was a clear case of murder. The commission sent a copy of its report to the prime minister, who, on November 7, ordered the ministry of home affairs to take appropriate action.

— Ved Parkash Gupta

Neighbours To The Rescue

I am an old **Manushi** reader and have always received great inspiration and learnt a lot from the journal. Recently, I came to know of a bride burning case in Amritsar. I went to the colony and talked to five families, including the immediate neighbours of the accused. All of them asserted that Veena alias Sunita had been killed by her in-laws.

On September 5, Veena had returned to her in-laws' house, 187 Shastri Nagar, having spent four days attending a wedding at her parents' house in Jullundur. A few hours later she was dead. Veena was married five years ago to Rajkumar Mehta, eldest of six sons of a leading cloth merchant of Amritsar. Ever since she got married, she was being harassed by her in-laws to get more things from her parents. Her life became more miserable when she gave birth to a daughter, a year ago. She was taunted with having brought a "burden" into the family, beaten and made to work like a housemaid in the joint family. She was seldom allowed to visit her parents.

On September 5, at 9 p.m., the neighbours saw fire in the kitchen and ran out to help them, but found the main door locked. Veena's father-in-law came out and said that she had committed suicide by burning herself. The neighbours suspected foul play and rang up the

police. A case was registered and Veena's husband and mother-in-law were arrested. The neighbours played a crucial role in bringing the culprits to book. Sunita's in-laws were trying to hurriedly get her body cremated, but the neighbours physically prevented them, and kept vigil round the house until the police came. The neighbours also formed an action committee, raised funds and engaged a lawyer to fight the case. It is alleged that the in-laws have heavily bribed the police. A retired brigadier, Mohinder Singh, also a resident of the colony, was one of those who took the initiative in fighting the case,

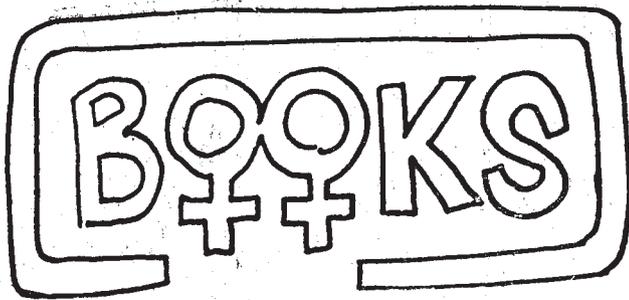
and he is the president of the action committee.

The next day, when the news reached the university campus, we decided to hold a protest demonstration outside the Mehta house. The demonstration was attended by 16 boys and seven girls. En route, we met a group of sportswomen who spontaneously joined us. When we reached there, the neighbours were waiting for us. Within minutes, the whole neighbourhood was out on the street, and we were 200! With 50 male residents, we broke into the Mehta house, pasted posters on the doors and walls, and raised

slogans. We painted the whole house black with slogans. After about one and a half hours, the police arrived and threatened to conduct a lathi charge if we refused to leave the house. We then went to the district commissioner and presented a memorandum demanding punishment for the policemen guilty of trying to hush up the case.

The active and united effort by the colony residents and our demonstration seem to have had some effect on the court hearing, as the accused were refused bail.

—Navsharan Kaur



Status Of Muslim Women In North India

By Shibani Roy

B.R. Publishing Corporation, Delhi, 1979. Pp. 241 Price: Rs 100

This is a painstaking and systematic study of Muslim women in 300 randomly selected families — 150 in the walled city area of Delhi and 150 in the chowk area of Lucknow. The age range is 18 to 50 years, and the family income range Rs 400 to 1,000. The questions asked cover education, employment, marriage, divorce, religion, women's place in family economy and their control over income. While answers are carefully tabulated, the emphasis is on interviews recorded verbatim rather than on the questionnaire as a method of collecting information, with the result that one is presented not just with statistics but with the women's perceptions, both individual and collective.

Shibani Roy's sensitivity to women's predicament enables her to take note of certain forms of resistance and connivance among women in the family, as well as to locate certain significant ways in which supposed protection of women's rights is undermined within the family. For instance, she discovered that 30.24 per cent of married women gave up their right to *mehar* in early married life. Of these women 50 per cent had been tricked into giving up this right: "The very first night or within a week of

marriage, the husbands pledge their sincerity and integrity, saying that they will make them happy so the women should wholeheartedly rely on them and should waive their claim of *mehar*. The newly wedded brides, ready to please their husbands, at once agree to it, saying that they free their husbands of the *mehar* money, quite unaware that their loving husbands had planted two witnesses to overhear their conversation. Later in life, these women have to put up with various forms of maltreatment from their husbands, because the women know that after divorce they will not be given any *mehar* money, and there will be nobody to support their children." (pp 83-84) The rest of the women had given up the right to *mehar* when their husbands were seriously ill or dying, that is, at the point when the right was about to materialize.

We need many more sympathetic and informative studies to help bridge the gap between women of different communities. However, this possible function of the book is somewhat marred by the author's lack of understanding of how the Muslims came to be a "backward community", and of their present predicament as a minority community. Instead of acknowledging the destructive role played by the British rulers in dividing Hindus and Muslims, she tends to believe that the reforming influence of the British has made non-Muslim women "equal to men." Following from this is her implicit assumption that Muslim women are "backward" but if their status were equal to that of non-Muslim women, all would be well.

In spite of these assumptions, however, the facts she presents are likely to be of special value to the non-Muslim reader, precisely because they reveal how similar are many of the restrictions and ways of life imposed on both Muslim and non-Muslim women. For example, most of us tend to see only the difference in lifestyle implied by the wearing of the burqa, but Roy's detailed presentation of such less visible but crippling restrictions as *nazar ka purdah* (boys and girls avoiding looking at each other) and *awaz ka purdah* (girls speaking and laughing in habitually low tones) helps make us aware of significant similarities.

—Ruth Vanita