

MOST of the demonstrations against torture of women for dowry that have been held in Delhi so far, have been staged only after a woman has been murdered or driven to suicide. These protest actions have played a very important role in mobilizing public opinion against the atrocities perpetrated on women by their husbands' families. However, those who actively participate in these protests often end up feeling demoralized because of the lingering sense that the protest has come too late, that there was need for intervention while the woman was still alive. Protesting families and organizations are soon caught up in the endless web of law courts and police, which usually let the murderers go scot free, leading to their demoralization and a growing feeling that nothing really changes.

In almost all dowry murder cases, the final act of violence is preceded by months or years of harassment and torture. When these women were abused, beaten and repeatedly thrown out of the house, they usually went back to their parents homes. But only too often, parents persuaded such harassed daughters to keep on trying to "adjust", and sent them back time and again to their husbands' homes.

Since in our society a woman in any case is conditioned to think that her duty lies in suffering, sacrifice and endurance, and that no life is possible outside marriage, she needs special support and encouragement if she is to step out of a brutal marriage, and live in a hostile society as a divorcee.

Why is it that parents keep surrendering to ever-increasing dowry demands, keep sending back their brutally battered daughter to the husband's home even after it has become a virtual torture chamber? Why is it that their "love and concern" for a daughter's welfare expresses itself in such cruel disregard of her dignity and her life? Is it that they feel the investment of dowry made to get the burden of a daughter off their hands will be wasted if she returns to them, as a divorcee? One such terrifying case was that of 20 year old Poonam, who, according

“Ab ham jalkar nahin marengi, Jeene ka adhikar lekar rahengi”

to newspaper reports, left her husband several times but was each time told by her parents that a married woman's place is with her husband, until she burnt to death in that "married woman's place." After their daughter is dead, one has heard such parents lamenting the large sums of money they had handed over to her in-laws. When such families stage protest demonstrations, one can only wonder whether they are protesting against the cruelty meted out to the woman, which they had advised her to endure, or lamenting the bad investment made by them in the form of dowry.

It is true that the husband and in-laws should be exposed and ostracized for

torturing a woman to death. But what about the woman's own parents and relatives who repeatedly handed her back to be beaten, tortured, humiliated? Are they any less morally responsible for her death? And for every one woman whose attempts to "adjust" lead to her death, are there not many more who drag on a miserable life, who continue to "successfully adjust" to physical and mental torture, handing down a legacy of self-abasement to their daughters?

If action is vitally necessary not just after a woman's death but during her lifetime, then a crucial component of such action is a supportive family which can give a woman courage to resist, can offer



Demonstration outside the house of Mr M.P. Batra in Ashok Vihar

her a dignified life as an alternative to the life of degradation in her husband's home. Recently, **Manushi** was involved in two such struggles waged by women with the active support of their families.

The first case was that of Radha* who came to us a couple of months ago. She is a typist in a private firm. She had been married eight years ago, and now has one small son. Her marriage turned out to be a brutal experience. Her husband used to regularly drink, abuse and beat her and her child. Since he spent most of his earnings on drink, she had to financially support the family and buy the household goods. Two years ago, when her younger sister got married, Radha's husband felt that she had been given a larger dowry than had Radha. He started demanding that he be compensated for this "loss" and his violence increased. Finally, the last time, he threw her out, she did not go back, as he had expected she would. Her family welcomed her home, and gave her full support. However, her husband had not allowed her to take her own or the child's clothes and other personal necessities. She does not earn much nor are her parents well off so she found it difficult suddenly to purchase anew all the things required for daily living. She pleaded with her husband to let her take her few personal belongings, at least a few saris, but he refused, thinking that if he harassed her in this way, she would meekly return to him. In desperation she came to **Manushi**. At very short notice, we decided to accompany her to her house and bring out her things. Though she is legally entitled to bring anything from the house as she is the legally wedded wife, she feared that he would turn violent if she went alone or with family members. Her husband had already removed Radha's jewellery and the few valuables which she had purchased with her own savings to his parents' house. However, we brought away her and the child's clothes as well as all the utensils and household goods which belonged to her.

One of the girls who accompanied us for this action, had told us that her aunt (mother's sister) had been similarly harassed and thrown out of the house by

her husband. She managed to persuade her aunt, Sudarshan also to join us in helping Radha bring away her belongings. Participation in this action perhaps proved a turning point in Sudarshan's thinking. She began to feel it is possible to act rather than suffer in silence. She then came and discussed her case with us.

Sudarshan is an MA B.Ed. and teaches in a government school. She was married at an early age to a man who proved to be physically unfit for marriage, so a divorce took place within a few months. Some years later, she was married on January 20, 1980, to M.P. Batra, a junior lecturer in government polytechnic, G. T. Karnal Road. Her family alleges that he pretended he had a civil engineering degree whereas he was actually only a matriculate diploma holder and that he also concealed the fact that he had been married twice before, had tortured and thrown out both wives, and also, had two children by his first wife.

Sudarshan told us that within a week of marriage, Batra started showing his true colours. He took away the whole of Sudarshan's salary, so that she was forced to take money from her parents for bus fare and other personal expenditure. Soon, he began to demand money on various pretexts. Sudarshan alleges that she was forced to withdraw large sums of money, until all the money she had saved up was exhausted and altogether she gave him about Rs 16,000. Batra then demanded that she give him all her jewellery, and that she bring more money from her parents. When she resisted in the mildest possible manner, he became infuriated. He abused her, beat her and threw her out of the house, saying she would be allowed to come back only if she brought her jewellery and more money. Sudarshan returned only after Batra's mother and brother gave her an assurance that she would not in future be beaten or harassed for money. However, she says, Batra's behaviour only deteriorated. He claimed that all the money she had earned since she took up a job in 1968 was his "legitimate dowry" and she should therefore give him an account of every paisa spent during that period, and hand over the remaining amount to him. He kept a check on every sari belonging

to Sudarshan, insisting that every decision must be referred to him—whether it was which sari she was to wear or the smallest expenditure to be incurred by her. Sudarshan silently bore all the maltreatment and never dared open her mouth to answer back. However, since she refused to allow her family to be blackmailed for money, Batra's violence increased. She alleges that on one occasion he tried to strangle her and only the presence of the servant saved her life. He was so violent even in bed that she feared serious injury to her person. When he threw her out the second time, she left and did not return, because by this time, his violence was so extreme that she feared for her life. Ever since, she has been staying with her elder sister.

However, she says that Batra has not ceased to harass her. He came to her sister's house, and ran amok, breaking things in the house, and threatening both her and the members of her family. The family, including the small children, has staunchly stood by Sudarshan all these years, encouraged her and refused to be intimidated into complying with Batra's demands. They relate how Batra continued employing his tactics — he would hang about outside Sudarshan's school, make obscene phone calls, threatening to attack and defame her. All attempts to reach a compromise failed because Batra would not listen to reason. Indu says he had tried to force her to give him a written statement that she had left the house "of her own free will, and taking all her goods with her", but later, when she suggested divorce by mutual consent, he demanded Rs 10,000 as advance money for him to "consider" the suggestion. On the other hand, he laid down certain conditions to which Sudarshan would have to agree if she wanted to return to him. These conditions were: she should hand over her entire salary to him and request him for money whenever she needed it; he would make all the purchases and she should not make any purchase without his permission; if anyone, even members of her family, wanted to meet her or talk to her, they would have first to take his permission; she should give him an account of the

salary earned by her during the two years that she had stayed away from him after marriage, and hand over to him all this money as well as all her jewellery. Though Sudarshan did not succumb to this blackmail, she was living in a state of fear and depression. She had given up nearly all social interaction and did not have the energy to make new friends.

When she discussed the case with us, we felt we should make an attempt to talk to Batra and see if he was amenable to an amicable settlement. So Madhu from **Manushi** accompanied Sudarshan to his office, hoping to talk things over peacefully. However, before they could speak a word, and explain why they had come, Batra, in the presence of his colleagues, began to shout at them, using the filthiest of abuses, and even attempted to manhandle Madhu, threatening to “fix her up.” Since a dialogue was impossible, they were forced to come away.

After this experience, all of us including Sudarshan, felt that the only means now open to us was to put social pressure on Batra, to demand that he stop harassing and blackmailing her. On the morning of Sunday, September 19, a large group of women and a few men went to Batra’s house, E-161 Ashok Vihar Phase I. To our surprise, as soon as we started shouting slogans, Batra came out of the gate and stood there, smiling nonchalantly. When the demonstrators shouted: “*Teen bivjyon ko mar bhagaya, shadi ko vyapar banaya*” and “*M.P. Batra, sharm karo, chullu bhar pani mein doob maro*” (He has beaten and driven out three wives, he has made marriage into a commercial trade” and “M.P. Batra, shame on you, go and drown yourself in a drop of water”), he replied: “Yes, I have married three times and I am ready to marry a fourth time. You can say what you like but I am going to marry seven times.”

Significantly, though Batra’s mother, brothers and sisters-in-law were all at home, not one of them came out. They all sat inside, keeping the doors and windows closed. The neighbours came out to see what was happening but not one of them spoke a word in favour of Batra. They all said they knew he was a rogue. Many of



Smiling shamelessly at the demonstrators

them expressed support and joined the demonstration.

Meanwhile, Batra continued to shamelessly assert his intention of marrying seven times, denied that he had taken a single paisa in dowry, and even dared to accuse Sudarshan of being a bad charactered woman, who had taken away his money and gold. He also abused and threatened some of the demonstrators. We had taken along some black paint to write slogans on the walls of the house, since we had not expected Batra to emerge from it. However, angered by his shameless lying, especially by his using the familiar weapon of calling Sudarshan a “loose woman”, some of the demonstrating women took the brush from the person

who was painting the wall, and blackened Batra’s face with it.

Sudarshan then very bravely narrated the entire history of her sufferings at the hands of Mr Batra. As her sister commented later, this was perhaps the first time Batra heard his wife speak at any length since she had always been too terrorized to open her mouth in front of him, and even after leaving him, had been too afraid and ashamed to narrate the story at length to anyone outside her family. We had been worried lest she be unable to speak on this occasion as well, but she spoke with courage and firmness, calling on the neighbours to support her and see that justice is done. At this, Batra openly threatened to kill both Sudarshan and Madhu. A slogan was raised: “*Bhavishya ka hatyara aaj dekh lo*” (“Come and have a look at a future murderer”).

Just as we were preparing to leave and march round the colony, Hariवंश, Batra’s son by his first wife, suddenly came from outside, and leapt on some of the women, beating and scratching them. He picked up bricks, stones and brought a cricket bat to attack us. The neighbours managed to restrain him and the demonstrators remained peaceful, raising the slogan: “*Hamla chahey jaisa hoga,*



Batra’s face being blackened when he mailed his wife and declared his intention to marry seven times

hath hamara nahin uthega” (“No matter what kind of attack is launched against us, we will not raise our hand in violence”)-Batra continued to assert his innocence, loudly calling on god to protect him and punish Sudarshan and all of us for our wickedness. For this hypocrisy, an appropriate slogan was: “*Hath mein hai puja ki thali, muh mein maa bahen ki gali*” (“He has a thali for worship in his hand but filthy abuses in his mouth”).

After about two hours we sang some songs and left, warning Batra that unless he stopped harassing and threatening Sudarshan we would be compelled to take further action. While distributing leaflets in the colony, we found that Batra is notorious there but people are in a quandary as to how to deal with him. Many of them expressed strong approval of our action.

We then went to the police station, where Sudarshan lodged a first information report against Harivansh’s physical attack and Batra’s threat to kill her. Since then, there have been phone calls at **Manushi** and at Madhu’s house, again threatening to kill Madhu.

Sudarshan’s participation in this action was possible only because of her family’s role in encouraging her, helping her, and being willing to share the social exposure and risks involved. They never allowed her to feel that if she protested or resisted, she might be left alone, homeless or unprotected. Her sister and two nieces joined the demonstration and one niece worked actively to mobilize support before the demonstration. In this, Sudarshan’s family was unlike many families who are so afraid that they will be disgraced by having a divorced woman on their hands

that they send the woman to her doom.

So far, one of the reasons why women hesitate to leave their homes even when they are being tortured beyond the limits of human endurance is that they feel there is nowhere they can go for refuge, since society will not allow them to live a respected dignified life once they step out of marriage. We need to work for a change in social attitudes so that men and families who demand dowry and harass women are socially disgraced, while women who struggle to live a life of dignity receive social support and endorsement in their fight against injustice. That is why the main slogan of the demonstration was: “*Ab ham jalkar nahin marengi, jeene ka adhikar lekar rahengi*” (“We will no longer burn to death, we will not rest till we win the right to live with dignity”). □

A Report From Meat Packing Factories

THERE are five medium sized cold storage factories in Ramesh Nagar, Delhi, which employ young women to do the work of grading and packing buffalo meat, mainly meant for export. The names of these factories are : Allana, Hindustan, Linker, RNA and Arabian Exports.

The women workers in these factories are from poor peasant families of Kerala. Most of them have completed their school education. Impoverishment and lack of employment opportunities force them to leave Kerala and come to Delhi in search of a livelihood. Each of them has to pay a considerable amount to the management touts before she can get a job in the cold storage factories.

These women are paid Rs 300 a month. Their labour starts when the slaughtered animals are brought in and ends only when the entire load of meat is graded and packed. The quantity of meat brought in is entirely at the discretion of the managers, so that working hours are completely arbitrary. The women have to work from eight to 15 hours a day, but are not paid extra for working longer hours.

Accommodation is “free”. The women are housed within the factory premises. About 75 women are dumped into a dingy three-room set with one kitchen and bathroom. This residence becomes a virtual jail, keeping the women at the mercy of the managers. The women are not allowed any visitors nor are they permitted to go out. The only visitors they can receive are the employers and their touts who brutally assault them.

The employers use petty economic doles to entice the women into surrendering their bodies to them. Those who put up resistance are brutally raped. Some of the women are appropriated as temporary “wives” by the factory managers. As soon as these men tire of one woman, which happens within days or at most weeks, they grab another, and another and another. The discarded women are systematically raped and beaten to keep them submissive.

The women live in an atmosphere of terror. They know that society has awarded them the “reputation” of being “morally and sexually loose” so they feel isolated

and do not wish to go back home.

Any woman who is unfortunate enough to become pregnant is packed away, ostensibly back home. One such woman was made pregnant and then packed off to Rajasthan in a truck going to Bombay. Nobody knows what became of her.

Women who actively resist rape and maltreatment can be unceremoniously thrown out of employment. Recently a group of seven women were dismissed from Allans cold storage because one of them resisted an attempted rape and the others stood up for her. They were served with a summary notice to quit within three days and on the third day, they were thrown out on the streets. A group of 20 women working in a cold storage factory in Meerut were thrown out for similar reasons. They are now trapped in a Delhi factory because they did not have the money to look for alternative employment.

Attempts to find jobs elsewhere are effectively sabotaged by the slavemasters. Of the seven workers thrown out by Allana, two managed to find work in a garment export firm but they were thrown out within three days because the earlier employers appraised the new employers that these women were not suitably pliable.

—Pranjali Bandhu (from Massline)