

The Ghost

NANIMA is the only one who listens to what I say. Papa says that Nanima is coming today. I'll tell Nanima about the ghost. When I tell Ma, she doesn't believe me, neither does Papa...The ghost never comes into my room when Nani is here. It's only when Nani goes away, that the ghost comes...

"Papa! Does the ghost go into Ma's room?"

"No."

"Then why has Nani lit a fire near Ma's bed?"

"To purify the air in the room."

"Not to drive the ghost away?"

"Urmi, how many times have I told you that there is no such thing as a ghost?"

"There is, there is—last night, it came into my room again..." But Papa had stopped listening to me. He went out of the room. Nani began questioning: "Did you hear the ghost's footsteps?"

"No."

"Does it come through the door or the window?"

"I don't know."

"Does it say anything?"

"No."

"Then how do you know that a ghost comes?"

"It touches me—on my head and shoulders and back."

"Is it black?"

"I don't know."

"You've never looked at it?"

"No, I feel too scared. I don't open my eyes."

"How long does it keep standing there?"

"I don't know."

Then Nani had a funny idea. She took

me into the next room, made me sit on the bed and washed my feet. Then she took that same water to Ma and said: "This is a fortunate girl. Drink the water from her feet and God will bless you with a son." And Ma drank up that dirty water. I was astonished. Papa was also there. I thought he would get annoyed with Nanima, but instead he remained quiet, watching both of them. Then Nani put my hand on my mother's head: "A daughter is a *devi*. Bless your mother that she may have a son. A brother for you." I saw that Nani was crying. Sometimes Nani laughs and sometimes she cries. I don't understand what has happened to her.

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Ma is very ill. Papa has brought the doctor. The doctor and Nani are both in the room but I don't know why Papa doesn't go in and won't let me go in either. "Papa! When will Ma get well?" I started crying. Papa picked me up, petted me. Then he started asking: "*Bol chidi ki ka?*" (Say—sparrow or crow?) What's happened to Papa? Ma is so ill and here he is talking about crows and sparrows.

Again he asked: "*Bol chidi ki ka?*" "*Ka*" I said. But I didn't understand why he was asking me this. Papa started laughing and kissed my cheek. When Nani came out of the room, she was wiping her eyes with her dupatta. I thought she was crying. But she looked at Papa and began to laugh: "Yes, it is sure. The doctor says to congratulate you."

●

Chachi lives in a room at the back of our house. No one else lives there—only



Chachi. Ma told me that she is not my real Chachi. But I like her very much all the same. Ma told me that Papa had a friend who he called his brother. That friend went abroad and there he married a *mem*. So poor Chachi lives alone. He sends her money every month but doesn't come himself. Chachi is very fond of me. Whenever I go to her room she gives me lots of things to eat. But there are many big trees near Chachi's room, Nani told me not to play near those trees. Ghosts come out of the trees. Papa is also so strange. Sometimes he says there are no ghosts, but sometimes he says Nani is right, I shouldn't go to the back of the house. But whenever I go there, Chachi doesn't let me come away soon, and then it gets dark, and Papa gets angry...

No one has yet told Chachi that a small boy is going to come to our house. I will go and tell her, and I'll tell her to also get a small boy like Ma. Then she can play with him all day. But not just now. It's getting dark now. And Nani says that as soon as it gets dark, the ghosts come and sit on the trees...

How strange Chachi is. When I told her about the small boy who is going to come to our house, she just sat silent for a long time. I thought maybe she hadn't heard me. So I said again: "Chachi, a doctor came to our house and she said a small boy will come out of my mother's stomach." Really! All these women are

exactly the same! Chachi started crying. When I asked: "Chachi, why are you crying?" she started laughing and said: "Look, I'm laughing now." Then I said: "You're crying and laughing together. The doctor said that when a small boy comes, his mother cries and laughs at the same time. Will a small boy come to you also?" At this, Chachi started crying again—I don't know why.

I wonder why Chachi never laughs. She tells me to go and see her every day. But when I do go, she sits quiet. She doesn't laugh or talk. She doesn't tell me stories. She just keeps giving me things to eat. Sometimes one thing, sometimes another. But today I came away at once. She kept asking me to eat some cream but I don't feel like eating when she cries...

Afterwards, Nani told me that one should not say such things to a woman whose husband does not live with her. I began to understand something. I asked: "Why doesn't Chacha live with Chachi the way Papa lives with Ma?"

Nanima pointed to the sky and said: "God writes a woman's fate with his left hand. One has to be thankful if by chance anything he writes is legible..."

Well, nobody used to listen to me! Now Ma knows that I was telling the truth. The ghost came into Ma's room at night. It didn't touch her the way it touches me. She didn't even know when it came. But in the morning she saw that some of her hair had been cut off. The ghost never cut my hair! Papa hasn't eaten anything today. Ma is crying. Nanima is also crying...and reciting a *mantra*...

Papa suddenly got up and went out of the room. His eyes are red—but not as if he's been crying—as if he's very angry—Papa told Dayali to make tea and then he ordered Nani and Ma to get up and drink it.

Ma never disobeys Papa. Still crying, she started drinking the tea. Papa put butter on a parantha and gave it to her. Ma couldn't refuse it. She started eating it. Papa gave me a glass of milk and told Nani to drink her tea. But Nani took only one sip and said: "I can't get it down.

Heaven knows what is going to happen,"

I think maybe our small boy won't come now. I want to ask Papa about it but today I am feeling afraid of Papa...

Ma is sleeping and Nani is reciting her prayers. Papa hasn't yet come back from court. Many times, when I am afraid, I start feeling very hungry. Chachi always keeps sweets in her room. And I don't have to ask her for them. She gives them to me herself. So I went to Chachi's room. The room was open but Chachi was sleeping. I know where the sweets are kept. My hand was on the cupboard door when Chachi suddenly woke up. I screamed aloud—Chachi's face was blue and swollen—I ran out of the room. Chachi kept calling to me but I didn't stop. I kept running till I reached the gate. When Papa returned, I was standing at the gate and crying...



"What's wrong?" Papa asked. "The ghost has come and made Chachi's face blue" I sobbed. I kept seeing Chachi's face, kept seeing it.

Papa stood silent for some time. Then he said: "I've told you not to go to the back of the house. What did you go there for?"

"But Papa, I didn't go in the dark. I went just now. But you said there are no..." Papa didn't answer. Perhaps he knows now that there really are ghosts.

Papa was silent again. I was afraid he would get angry but instead he said: "You are my brave girl, aren't you?"

"Yes Papa."

"You know that a beautiful small boy is going to come to our house?"

"Yes."

"When a boy comes, people are happy and talk of pleasant things. They don't feel afraid and cry."

"But Ma was crying in the morning because the ghost came to her room at night."

"It won't come again."

"It won't come into my room?"

"No, it won't come at all."

"But today it came to Chachi's room."

"Now it won't come."

"When Nanima was crying in the morning, I was afraid that may be our small boy wouldn't come."

"He will come but only if you promise me one thing", Papa said, "I told you in the morning not to talk to Ma about ghosts. Now promise me that you will never talk to her about ghosts."

"I won't" I promised.

Papa was right. The ghost hasn't showed up for a long time. Nani has to go to the village today. She was telling Papa to call Dadima from the village. But I was glad that Papa refused. I don't like Dadima. Ma told me that Dadima used to live with us before. But when I was born, Dadima got very angry because I was a girl, not a boy. So she went away to the village. Why was Dadima angry because a girl was born? Ma says that old women are like that. But Nanima is also old and she didn't get angry with Ma.

Hai Ram! I hope Dadima doesn't come. But maybe when the small boy comes, Dadima will be happy and will come too. Why should Ma have a boy this time? Why doesn't she have another girl? Then Dadima will never come again.

She came once last year, on her way back from a pilgrimage. When Nanima comes, she at once starts petting me but Dadima didn't even call me to her. When Ma gave her food, she took some water out of her small pitcher, sprinkled it on the plate and then began to eat. Ma says that was Gangajal and she purified our plate with it. She had kept her glass of water on the bed and it was about to

topple over. But when I put out my hand to steady it, Dadi immediately threw her plate of food on the floor. "You witch!" Dadi caught her stick as if she was going to hit me with it. "I won't touch food or water in this house. You keep this *churi-chamari* (low born untouchable) to yourself."

...Dadi is angry because I am a girl. But when Dadi was small she too was a girl. Today, Nanima told me such a strange story. She was saying that one has to be very fortunate to give birth to a boy. Nanima had five sisters but no brother. When her brother was born, all the sisters drank his urine. How dirty! Just hearing of it made me feel sick. But Nanima was laughing as she told me. Nanima isn't dirty but I don't know how she could drink someone's urine...

Papa told me not to go to Chachi's room. But today Chachi was standing at her door and beckoning to me. It wasn't dark so I went. I was afraid that Papa would get angry. So I told Chachi that I couldn't stay long with her.

"Chachi, are you very ill?" I saw that she looked very weak.

"Yes. I am going to the village. That's why I called you—to see you once before I go."

"When will you come back?"

"I don't know."

"I know—you are afraid of the ghost!"

"Yes...no..." Chachi began to cry.

"But Papa says that the ghost won't come again. Did it come to your room?"

"No."

"Once—once when your face had become blue?"

"You saw my face? Is that why you ran away?"

"Yes."

"Did the ghost beat you?"

"No."

"But it used to beat me."

"Why did it beat you?"

"I don't know."

"Did it come again?"

"No."

"Then why are you afraid?"

"I'm not afraid."

"Then why are you going?"

Chachi began to cry again. She kissed

me and said: "I've made almond halwa for you. Eat a little." I wasn't hungry but Chachi made me eat the halwa.

"Chachi, when our little boy comes, will you come back?" "No, I don't know...yes..." How strange Chachi is—she doesn't know anything.



Oh God, now Dadima has come. Why did she have to come? Ma got up and touched her feet. Dadima is also crying and laughing together, just like Nani. She is quarrelling with Ma but not in the same way. She's saying: "You people didn't even inform me, am I nothing to you? I'm alive but you behave as if I'm dead..." Today she kissed Ma several times. May be she will pet me too...I thought that when Dadi starts eating, I would touch her plate and then she would throw away the food and remain hungry. But today Dadima is so happy, everyone is happy. So today I won't touch her plate—let her eat as much as she wants to.

The food was being cooked, Ma was lying down and Nanima was gently massaging her. Papa was talking to Dadima and both of them walked towards the trees at the back of the house. It was growing dark. I called out to Papa: "Papa,



don't go near the trees." But he didn't hear me, so I went after them. But by then Papa had passed the trees, opened Chachi's room taken Dadi in there. I didn't go into the room because I thought Dadi might get annoyed. It was dark outside but I wasn't afraid. After all, I could see Papa through the window and Dadi was lighting a lantern.

"I have to tell you something today" Papa was saying, "That's why I brought you here. This is a happy occasion so don't spoil it for nothing. Don't keep calling the girl *churi-chamari* all the time."

Oh, so this was about me! Dadima doesn't call anyone else names. It's only me she calls *churi-chamari*.

Dadi was saying: "Arre, do you think I don't feel your sorrows? I only say that when my heart burns for you."

"But she's my daughter, my daughter." Papa was telling Dadi. What was the need to tell her that? Everyone knows that, Dadi too.

Dadi was saying: "I know that but words can't change facts. After all, it's someone else's blood—who knows which *chura's* or *chamar's*. You didn't enquire anything—not even the caste. Just picked it up and brought it home."

The trees were wailing very loudly in my ears.

Papa said: "I sinned just to protect your caste honour. That's what I'm trying to tell you. She's my daughter, my own flesh and blood."

"What? Are you telling the truth?" Dadi's voice rose, as if it had suddenly become very forceful.

Papa said: "You are my mother. I can't lie before my mother." Dadi said: "But you said someone had abandoned her in the hospital?"

Papa replied: "Well, what else could I say? What could I tell her mother? If I had told her the truth, would she have brought her up like a daughter?"

I couldn't understand anything but it seemed Dadima could. She was saying: "If this was it, you should have told me at that time. For nothing, I've been constantly scolding the girl and taunting her."

"I was afraid - I thought you wouldn't

be able to keep it to yourself. Now swear to me by your grandson-to-be that you won't let it out of your mouth."

Dadi began to cry: "Oh you very wise fellow, if you had only told me then, I would have taken her to my heart. I needn't have wasted so many years in the village.

I could have stayed here like a queen." Papa said: "I thought of it many times but couldn't get up the courage. Her mother doesn't know anything." Silence again—outside and inside of me. I began to feel dizzy so I sat down against the wall, outside the window. Who—who am I? Dadi doesn't know, Ma also doesn't know. I heard a voice again. Dadi was asking: "Who is the mother of this girl?"

Papa answered: "Let that be. Don't ask me that. I'll never tell anybody that." Trembling, I stood up again. Dadi was asking: "Is her mother alive?"

Papa said: "Yes, she is alive. But I don't have any contact with her. She bore the girl and I brought her home. I give her money. I'll keep giving her money as long as she lives. I had promised her that and I'll keep my promise."

My mother...? I couldn't understand some things, but I did understand something. I knew for sure that I shouldn't remain where I was. No—I won't tell Papa that I heard anything. I came back alone through the darkness. Perhaps I was crying. Nanima asked: "Oh my God, what's happened?" She came and touched my forehead. "You seem to have fever. Where were you? How many times have you been told not to stand under the trees in the evening?"

After that I don't know whether Nani made my bed or Dayali. The pillow was very warm and so was the *khes*. Why is Dadi waking me up? Why doesn't she let me sleep? No, I won't drink milk. Papa, the milk is very sweet...Ma...

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"She's opened her eyes after eight days. What high fever she had." Dadi comes to me every few minutes. Sometimes to put a blanket over my feet, sometimes to give me water or tea or medicine. But where is Nani? Papa has just taken my temperature. He says there

is no fever now but I should not get up from bed. Where is Ma? That day Papa had told Dadi something and told her not to tell anyone. I know Papa is my Papa but where has Ma gone? She is not Ma, and Ma... That day, Dadi asked: "Is her mother alive?" and Papa said: "She's alive." But who knows, she may have died by now? If she's alive, why doesn't she come here? Papa won't tell. Why won't he tell?

Papa has come back. He says: "Ah now, my little girl's fever is gone. Are you feeling hungry?"

"No Papa. Where's Ma?"

"Ma is with Kaka. Our Kaka has come—your small brother."

"Kaka's come! Where is he?"

I got up to go and see him but Papa made me lie down again.



"Is Kaka beautiful?"

"Like you."

Papa has gone. I wanted to ask him but I didn't. I feel afraid of Papa. This Ma is Kaka's Ma. My Ma...?

Kaka is very beautiful, very small. I touched him. He's soft like silk. Ma called me and petted me. Then she said to Papa: "See, how weak my daughter has grown under your care!" I looked at Papa for a long time. I felt that Papa must have told Dadi a string of lies that day. Papa said that day that this Ma is not my mother. But Ma loves me very much, even more than Papa does. If she's not my mother, why does she love me? Why does Papa tell lies?

But why is Dadima so fond of me now? She never was, before, Today she was saying: "I'll buy you silver anklets and a gold ring."

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Papa said the ghost wouldn't come again—Oh Ma...Papa...the ghost...

"*Hai Ram*, my inside is splitting..."

This is Nanima's voice, Nanima is crying. "Nanima, did the ghost come near you?"

"Oh who has cut my heart?" Dadima is screaming. "Dadima, have you seen the ghost?"

Papa is standing, silent. He won't speak. "Why don't you speak, Papa? What has happened to you?"

"*Hai ri* this house has eaten up my daughter." Nanima is hitting her head against the walls. "Papa, why don't you speak? Papa, Kaka is crying. Tell Ma to give him milk." Papa picks up Kaka and begins to cry.

Dayali has caught hold of my arm and is taking me out of Ma's room. "Your mother has died, Urmi. She was perfectly well, God knows how she died in her sleep" Dayali said.

"Ma..." I pulled away from Dayali and ran to Ma's bed. Ma doesn't speak or move, doesn't even look at me.

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"Papa, where has Ma gone?"

"Urmi, drink this medicine and go to sleep. You have fever again."

"Papa, where is Kaka?"

"He's sleeping."

"And Ma?"

Papa doesn't answer.

"Papa, many people came here and were crying. Where have they gone?"

"They've gone home."

"Why did they come here and cry?"

"Your mother..."

"Papa, Dayali says Ma is dead." Papa didn't answer. He sat down on my bed and looked at me for a long time. Then he looked at the door. Then he suddenly asked me: "Urmi, are you sure you saw the ghost day before yesterday?"

"Yes Papa. But you said the ghost wouldn't come again."

"Try and remember clearly."

"Yes Papa. I was sleeping and it touched my head. I woke up and

screamed.”

“Did you open your eyes or not?”

“Yes I did, Papa, but it was so dark...”

“Could you see it or not?”

“No Papa.”

Papa was silent again. “Papa, did it go to Ma’s room also?”

“Yes.”

“Did you see it?”

“No.”

“Did the ghost kill Ma?”

“Yes.”

“Will it kill me too?”

“No.”

Papa doesn’t really know. He just says yes or no as he likes.



Now there is no Ma in Ma’s room. Only Kaka, Nani and Dadi. Papa sleeps in my room now. And he stays here all day too. He doesn’t go to court.

Nanima says, “The lady doctor gave her bad medicines.”

Dadima says: “Bad days had come to us.”



Papa is asleep. Everyone is asleep but I can’t sleep. Where is Papa going? He was asleep just now...Why is he getting up and going away at this time of night? I’ll feel more afraid if I am left alone here. Papa went out of the door. I felt very afraid. I sat up in bed. Then I went out and looked around but Papa was not to be seen. He was right here just now. Where has he gone? I went past Dayali’s bed and came out. Someone was going towards the trees. That was Papa going towards the trees. I stood there for a long time. And saw...Papa going through the trees into Chachi’s room. My feet and legs were trembling but I followed Papa.

A diya was burning in Chachi’s room. The door was closed but I could look through the window there was Papa. And Chachi was there too, when did she come? “Sit down” she was saying to Papa. But Papa kept standing. He neither spoke nor sat down. Chachi was saying: “I wanted to congratulate you on your son’s birth. But now—I heard the sad news from the *mali*.”

Papa spoke at last. “What had to happen, has happened” he said. “Well,

may the boy live long” replied Chachi.

Papa began to laugh, so loudly that I felt afraid. Then he said: “You want the boy to live long?”

“Do you think I am your enemy?” Chachi had started crying.

“Not my enemy, but the enemy of my son and of his mother.” And Papa kicked Chachi very hard. She screamed and then sat down heavily on the ground. Papa was saying: “I began to suspect you ever since the day you cut her hair.”

Oh God! Was it Chachi who cut Ma’s hair?

Papa went on: “I thought you would be straightened out by that day’s beating.” Did Papa beat Chachi that day when her face had turned blue? But Chachi said the ghost had come... “How many times I told you not to go into Urmi’s room at night” Papa was saying.

God! Was it Chachi who used to come into my room and frighten me? Is Chachi the ghost?

Chachi was crying. “I couldn’t help that. At night, a blind terror comes over me and I want to sleep, clasping her to my breast. After all, she is born of my womb.”

Is Chachi my mother? Trembling, I sat down on the ground.

Papa must have hit Chachi again. I heard a noise which sounded like that. Then I heard Papa’s voice: “Now tell me, what is it you want?”

“Nothing.” I could hear her weeping.

Papa said: “I have never said anything to you. I told you that from now on there is no relationship possible between you and me. I will keep my daughter with me and you are never to tell her that she is your daughter.”

“I have never told her” she said. But Papa went on: “You asked for 200 rupees a month. I’ve given it to you every month. You didn’t want to live in the village. You wanted to live here so that you could see your daughter, so I kept you here.”

Chachi seemed to have put her head at Papa’s feet. She was saying: “I lay my head at your feet, when have I ever said that you haven’t kept your promises? I have never said anything, never asked for anything. Why don’t you listen to

me...”

Papa went on: “You don’t ask for anything, do you? You only ask for the life of my son, for the life of his mother. But today, I’m right here to listen to your babble. I sent the *mali* to call you from the village. Do you know why?” Chachi didn’t answer. I heard Papa’s voice again: “To hand you over to the police.”

“Police..why...”

“You poisoned her.”

“Poison...I—how could I poison her I was in the village, you had sent me to the village.”

“I hadn’t tied you up in the village, had I? You came here secretly...”

“No.”

“You went to the kitchen where her medicinal water was boiling and you...”

“No, no, no...”

“You knew that only she would drink that water.”

“No...no...”

“But perhaps you didn’t know that I would get the remaining water tested. But you couldn’t hold yourself back—you went to Urmi’s room that night too. I have proof of it.”

Chachi poisoned Ma? I tried to think—this is not Chachi, this is my mother, but I felt that I was mixing things up. No, she is not my mother, not she—someone else...

Her voice, crying: “Kill me, kill me with your own hands, but don’t give me to the police.”

Papa was saying: “You thought that the one who had to die had died and now you would take her place...You!” Papa was laughing very loudly. I felt very afraid of Papa’s laughter. I don’t know when I got up and how I reached my room. When my eyes opened, it was morning. Papa was giving me the thermometer and telling Dayali: “Tell the *mali* to call the doctor. She’s got high fever again.”

Then the policemen came...many policemen... Chachi was running and policemen were running after...not Chachi...Ma...no, not Ma—Then she went to Kaka’s bed and picked him up and ran away... Kaka was crying aloud...A policeman snatched Kaka away from her ...Papa was rocking Kaka in his arms...

Oh, don't poke that needle into my arm..no, I won't drink this medicine....bitter poison...there is poison in it...

Dayali has given me a sponge bath. Nanima has taken out a new kamiz for me to wear. "The girl is fortunate, she has survived" Dadima was saying, "Where's Papa ?" I ask. "Today he's gone to court for the first time" Dadi says, "How many days he has been sitting beside you."

"And Kaka ?" I ask.

"He's just had his milk and gone to sleep. When he wakes up, I'll bring him

to you."

I want to ask something else. I don't know what it is, but I don't ask.

"Don't leave the boy alone" Dadi says to Nani, "Go and sit near him." Then she gets up and goes to him and Nani follows her.

Dayali says: "You had very high fever and you kept having nightmares of policemen."

"Did policemen come here?" I ask.

"No, why should they come here?"

"Chachi..."

Dayali is silent, then she says: "Shall I tell you something ? That Chachi, who used to live in the back room, went to

the village. And yesterday we heard that she got drowned in the village canal."

I am lying still on the bed. I think...there was a ghost who used to come at night and put its hand on my head. And I used to be so afraid. But now when I remember it, I don't feel afraid at all..not at all...

My head feels heavy but then I realize it is only the weight of my own arm which is lying on my head... □

(abridged and translated by Manushi from the Hindi edition of the novelette "Pakki Haveli")

An Insulting Report— Women Journalists Protest

The Hindustan Times of December 24, 1981, carried on page 3 an item entitled "Promiscuous IFS woman." In it, an unnamed IFS woman officer was accused of "having several paramours, leaving her lawful husband to entertain himself with alcoholic beverages." Her courtship and marriage were termed a "quaint affair" and it was alleged that she was ashamed of her middle class husband, and was trying to rise in her profession by giving in to the demands of MPs, chief ministers and senior officers.

Following objections, presumably from the ministry of external affairs, the newspaper published an apology on December 30, in which it disavowed any intention to insult women in general or the IFS in particular. No apology was made to the woman concerned. However, just below this apology was another item entitled "Women's lib with a vengeance" which reported that a woman in Jammu had married several times, and when asked why she did this, "retorted that she changed her husbands for personal pleasure."

Women journalists working for Hindustan Times decided to take a stand on this issue. They got together and wrote a letter of protest to the editor of the paper. The letter described the apology as "objectionable in its wording and in its manner of display" and criticised the Jammu report.

We reprint here extracts from the letter: "...We wish to ask why the fact of a woman's marrying several times is (a) news, (b) why the woman should explain her lifestyle... the report displayed the very attitudes which the purported apology was meant to retract—that an individual's private life is his or her concern alone, unless it adversely affects the public interest. The particularly pernicious aspect of the report was that the woman concerned lives far away from Delhi and cannot object...That the first report appeared in the Hindustan Times is not the responsibility of the correspondent alone. It was presumably passed successively by the chief reporter, the news editor and the chief sub-editor. The editor is ultimately



responsible for all that appears in the paper. We, journalists of the Hindustan Times, wish to strongly express our concern, opposition and anger that such objectionable and insulting reports should appear in this paper. 'Promiscuous IFS woman' was pernicious since it singled out a woman and made allegations about her private life. It expressed the stereotype that all women, even those in responsible positions, are frivolous, materialistic and dumb. It can possibly have very harmful consequences on the woman's life and career. Was her view even asked?..."

This letter was signed by several women and men journalists but the editor of Hindustan Times refused to publish it.