

I HAVE been working with Ameya for 10 months. Ameya is a group which conducts development activities like children's classes, adult literacy programmes and health camps, in addition to taking up local issues, in Chembur slums in Bombay.

In the course of working in the slum Pancha Seela Nagar, we were introduced to Malarkodi, a young woman who lived in the slum and was a potential leader among the women. Very soon, she endeared herself to us, and used to work with us in the health camp. She and her husband also participated in slum meetings.

Malarkodi and her husband Dharmalingam had two children. Malarkodi was about 25 years old, shabbily dressed like any slum woman, but very confident and cheerful. She was a beautiful woman and I can still remember the smile with which she used to receive us. Dharmalingam is a municipality worker and earns about Rs 600 a month, more than half of which goes into paying an old debt incurred for a trip to their native place, Madras. But he did not allow Malarkodi to take up a job outside the house. In February 1982, I found a job for her in a clinic. She was willing but her husband would not agree. This happened the day before her death.

It was a Sunday and as usual we were rounding up our evening visit to the slum. When we came to her house, the door was closed. This was quite unusual. I knocked and some women admitted me. Malarkodi was lying unconscious, bruised and in a high fever. Her upper lip was bleeding and her whole body was swollen and shivering. I couldn't make out what she was suffering from. Most of the women were reluctant to answer my questions. One or two tried to convince me that she had epilepsy and had fallen and hurt herself in an epileptic fit. They hastened to add that this was normal for her. It happened every day! I was foolishly taken in by this story. Then more of my friends came inside but none of them could make out what was happening. It was Sunday so all the clinics were closed. And if it was epilepsy, what could be done? The next slum meeting was to be held within half an hour. So we made arrangements for her

ALFIE

Was Her Death More Hurtful, Or Her Life?

to be looked after, and proceeded to the meeting. It was a day of hectic activity but I was restless and disturbed after seeing her in that condition. Then, a man who owned a coffee shop near her house, rushed into the meeting and told us that she had died. She had been badly beaten up and killed by her drunken husband. He also kicked her in the vagina. This caused internal bleeding which killed her. We soon came to know the whole story. Some time ago, Malarkodi had run off to Madras with a former boyfriend. Her husband went and brought her back, promising to behave

well. But after that, he continued to remind her of her elopement. He used to drink and beat her up. All the neighbours knew this since it was an everyday routine. But this Sunday the routine took a fatal turn. She died.

This death has hurt me. More than her death, her life—being forced to marry a man, bear him two children and then become the victim of his rage and suspicion. And to add to it, the apathy of the people around who contributed to the cruelty by their non-interference.

Before this, I had never taken women's issues seriously. I used to laugh



—Selma Waldman

away the idea of women's emancipation as a liberated women's "fad." Malarkodi's death has come as an eye-opener to me. What is the status of an average Indian woman? Has she any chance of dignity in life and in death? These thoughts hurtled into my mind. Now I realize how much work is to be done to help women become aware that the routines of their everyday life, such as drinking and wife beating, can be dissolved through organized action. While undertaking such action, there will be the possibility of alienating men. At any rate, a certain amount of hostility has to be handled to achieve permanently better results.

We encountered varied responses to Malarkodi's death from different people. Most of the women in the slum were afraid to speak about the murder though they all were aware of what had happened to her. When I asked some of the men why they had not intervened, their reply was that it was a "family quarrel." A step ahead was the reply: "She was killed by her husband. So why should we interfere?" But it was not just the slum dwellers who reacted in this way.

I found that almost all men, whatever their class, job or status, thought in the same manner. When we went to the police inspector of Tilak Nagar to demand Malarkodi's dead body, he said: "Why are you taking up this issue? She was an immoral woman. Otherwise, no sane husband would do this." When the people were organized into a morcha to protest against wife beating and drinking, and to demand her body from the police, two gentlemen passing by on the road came and said to us: "Why do you make a hue and cry about this? After all, it is her husband who did it." Later, when I was narrating the incident to some boys who study in my class, they too offered the same consolation: "Oh, it was her husband who killed her. Then what can you do about it?"

So, for a woman, the *thali* is a death noose. A husband is almost deified, to the extent that he can dole out life or death to her. If we don't fight against this superstitious, oppressive culture of ours, how can we emancipate women and men? □

POORNAMMA

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the custom of selling brides prevailed in Andhra Pradesh. It was known as *kanyasulkam*. Young girls were married off in this manner to rich, old men, hence the prevalence of child widowhood.

Whether the man pays the monetary price, or the girl pays, as is the case today, the fate of woman is ever lamentable and the result often the same—self-extinction to escape suffering and torment. I have done this free translation of the Telugu ballad *Puttadi Bomma Poornamma* by the late Gurujada Apparao. This old ballad is, I feel, poignantly true for all times.

—M. Satya, Madras

*My little golden-hued ones
lotus-eyed lovely maidens
have you heard this story
of a golden girl like you
come, listen to my story
in the midst of purple mountains
rested an emerald forested valley
in its middle, a little lake nestled
on its bank, a temple
and on the altar, a golden Durga
to the temple priest was born
a little girl, golden skinned and
beautiful
her parents called her Poorna
lovely and playful grew the little
girl
loving and devoted to Durgā*



*flowers of all seasons
she strung for her Durga
fruits of all seasons
she offered her Durga
her beauty tempted greed
and parents for Poorna found
a husband, rich but old
when little Poorna went to play
her friends taunted Poorna away
mocking her husband, old and bent
Poorna ran away from playmates
and play
and wept at her Durga's feet
time went by and came the day
when Poorna's husband came tottering
to take Poorna away*

*laden with jewels and silks
but Poorna wept and looked away
kith and kin, even her mother
greedy,
cried for Poorna, to be gone from
them,
to her husband's home
only the father, pleased with the
riches
found heart to greet the groom
collecting her flowers, Poorna left
for one last lonely prayer
to her beloved Durga
and, leaving, she beseeched
"when I am gone, remember me
amid laughter, fun or play
as you rejoice together...
when a little golden girl is born
to one of you, give her my name
to remember me by..."
the golden sunset turned rusty
as cows kicked up dust, returning,
home
but Poorna did not return,
birds turned wing nestward
and tigers stirred out for prey
but Poorna did not return
the swans in the lake
swam with added grace
of Poorna's gait,
the petals of blue lotus opened
reflecting the shine
of Poorna's black eyes,
and the lake shed a tear for her
on each petal
and gently lapped over Poorna's
sinking form,
gold glistened anew, taking Poorna's
sheen
and the earthen lamp lit Durga's
breast
that took little Poorna's soul to rest
so went little Poorna to her home
at last
have you never heard this story
my little, lovely maidens
of the golden girl Poorna
who was so like you?*