

# Sumitra...One of Many

*According to Runu, a social worker in Sunder Nagri, one of the segments of Nand Nagri, a resettlement colony on the outskirts of Delhi, Sumitra is one of the most extraordinary women she knows, the boldest woman in the colony, a woman from whom she has learnt a lot. Sumitra is 34 years old and belongs to the Koli community. Today, she is the one to whom women from the neighbourhood instinctively go for help in solving their problems. She is the one always able and willing to escort a woman to the dispensary, the ration office, the court, the one who often shelters destitute or maltreated women, the one who constantly points out to the social workers various cases of injustice against women which she thinks should be taken up. She is known for her outspokenness and fearlessness. But it was not always so. Sumitra has lived through hell and only by chance escaped becoming one of the anonymous victims of murder within the family. This, translated from Hindi, is her story, as she told it to Ruth Vanita.*



YES, I have changed my condition. For years I was crushed and ground down—now, things are very different. I feel that a woman should not kill herself. She should keep fighting...

I was married at the age of 13. My parents live in village Karaura, district Bulandshahr in Uttar Pradesh. My father was a weaver. We were very poor and I was married into a poor family so that no dowry would have to be paid. I had studied up to the fifth class but my husband had never even seen a school. Ten months after marriage, I was sent to my in-laws' house in Delhi. There were six people in the house—my 18 year old husband, his mother, his elder brother and sister-in-law and their two children. The total income of the family was about Rs 400.

On the first night, my mother-in-law explained to me: "Look, you will have to live with both your husband and your brother-in-law. I also lived like that and so did your sister-in-law." I said: "No, I won't be able to do that." This made them angry with me.

In the daytime, my mother-in-law used to beat me, and at night my husband used to shower kicks and blows on me. My sister-in-law used to remain silent. My mother-in-law had a habit of pretending to be possessed by spirits. She would go into a fit and cry out: "I am the Chaunderewari goddess. This

woman is evil. Throw her out of the house."

I was only a child. When I could not bear sexual intercourse, and would scream with pain, they would taunt me, saying: "Why did you get married?" Within a month, I returned to my parents and stayed there for 10 months. When my brother-in-law came to fetch me, my father told him: "If you torture her again, I will bring her away."

When I came back, they began to treat me worse than a servant. From then onwards, I was not allowed to sleep with my husband. I had to sleep in the verandah outside, while all of them slept inside. I had to work from morning to night, cooking, cleaning, washing all the soiled clothes, and looking after my brother-in-law's two children. And while I was doing all this, if any one of them demanded a glass of water, and I was slightly late in giving it, because I had first to wash my hands, they would immediately beat me up. When I sat down to eat, my husband would pick up the plate and take it away. I was starving so I had to eat some food on the sly. When they caught me doing this, they beat me with the heavy chains which were used to tie up the buffaloes (showing scars on her thighs). They used to taunt me, saying I was a bought

woman—because they had redeemed a couple of gold ornaments which my father had pawned.

One day my father came to see me. He tried his best to make my mother-in-law see reason. When he was leaving, I wanted to go with him. There was a relative of ours, whom we used to call Jijaji, who had arranged my marriage. When he saw me trying to leave, he said: "Let us tie her up, stuff a cloth in her mouth and throw her inside the house. When she dies, we can dump her in a ditch." Hearing this, I ran out into the street, barefoot as I was, and cried out: "No, no, don't do that to me. I am going. Please let me go." They began to shout: "Look at her, she is running away"; but I managed to go with my father.

A year later, my brother-in-law came to fetch me. I didn't want to go with him but I had no choice. When I reached here, my mother-in-law said that I would have to cook separately. A kind of wall was built in the yard to form a separate kitchen for me. My husband said: "You can separate if you want, I refuse to separate." One day, I offered him some food, and he said: "I can't eat anything cooked by your hands." I felt bad and answered: "You should not speak like that." He got into a rage and beat me up. He used to beat me between the waist

and the knees so that no one could see the bruises. If the neighbour women heard me screaming and came to intervene, he would abuse them, saying: "Take her and give her to your husband." They would retreat, unable to bear such insults.

This time, when he beat me, I went out of the house on the pretext of going to the toilet. Once out, I threw the lota into the well and ran to my sister's mother-in-law who lived nearby. When she saw my bruised body, she took me to my sister's house in Sabzi Mandi. My sister's family said they would try to coax my in-laws to behave better, and would then send me back, but I said: "Do you want me to be killed in that house? Let me go home." So I went home and stayed there five years.

This time, neither did my father try to send me back nor did they come to fetch me. They just spread false rumours that I had stolen their jewellery and run away. People began to talk. Finally, my father suggested that I should get divorced and he would then arrange another marriage for me. When I refused, he said: "Look, you've stayed here five years. I can't keep you any longer." He started creating a scene every day, insisting that I should agree to remarriage.

Why did I refuse? Partly because I had been taught that a girl's honour consists in staying in the family into which she is married. Also, I thought that after all, I had neither seen nor known the second husband so what would I do if he turned out to be like the first one? The truth was that I had begun to hate the whole idea of going to any in-laws' house. I wanted to stay at my parents' house. Neither did I want to return to my husband nor did I want to remarry. But everyone was determined that I should remarry. Finally my father told me: "You can go wherever you like. There is no place for you in this house."

I was in a fix. It never occurred to me to study or to look for a job. There was no one to advise me and no girl in our village had ever done such things. I asked my aunt's advice and she said: "That is your home, go back there. Fall at

their feet, beg forgiveness, and stay there, no matter how they treat you."

So I returned alone, to that house. As soon as my mother-in-law saw me, she pounced on me and she and my brother-in-law began to beat me. I fell at her feet and begged pardon though I knew I was not at fault, but she was adamant. She said: "There is no place here for you." They threw me into the street and locked the door. Then our community panchayat met and decided that I should be accepted back into the house. When my husband came, he also beat me, saying: "What has she come here for?" When I put my head at his feet, he kicked me. I pleaded with them to keep me since I had nowhere to go, so finally they agreed to keep me, on condition that I would not complain even if I was not given food to eat.

I lived there—half starved, beaten, kicked, abused by everyone, doing all the work, massaging the hands and legs of each person. I was terribly weak, so for months together, my menstruation used to stop. I had no contact with my husband or with any other man. I used to stay without bathing for weeks, because they refused to give me soap or oil.

I had developed cataract so I had to undergo an operation. After the operation, I had to go for periodic check-up at Lady Hardinge hospital. My in-laws would not give me money for bus fare so I had to walk all the way. At that time, due to weakness, I had not been menstruating for seven months. One day, I was going to the hospital when I suddenly fainted and began to haemorrhage. A crowd collected. I was made to sit in a public toilet, to rest, but I could not summon the strength to get up. Finally, one of the men in the crowd took me to the hospital. When the doctor asked if I was pregnant, I said: "I don't know", because at that time I didn't know that pregnancy results from cohabitation. I only knew that stoppage of menstruation is a sign of pregnancy.

My husband had been informed of my condition but no one came to fetch me from the hospital. At 9.30 in the night,

the man who had brought me there and had been waiting for someone from my family to come, wanted to leave. I asked him to take me to my sister's house.

My sister took care of me. My clothes were drenched in blood. After a few days, my father took me to my in-laws' place. When we reached there, we saw that the house was full of people, mother-in-law caught hold of father by the throat and banged his head against the wall, screaming "Take that whore away." father replied: "I won't take back. You can finish her off if you want to", and leaving me there, went away. I sat outside the house weeping. Suddenly, I saw my in-laws approaching, armed with sticks and pitchforks. I was terrified. Just then, I saw my sister, a stick in her hand, coming towards me. She confronted my in-laws, and forcibly took me away to her house declaring that she would not let stay there a moment longer.

When the hospital certified that I had not in fact been carrying child, my in-laws called me back. Again, the abuses and beatings began. Now they had a new taunt. When I asked for money to buy rations, they would say: "We do have money for you. First produce that man who took you to the hospital or produce that child you bore."

My sister's in-laws then decided to take the matter before the panchayat and decide it once for all. They said: "We have watched this drama long enough." When my husband heard this, he got alarmed. He called me aside and asked me: "What really happened to you? Tell me the truth."

"What makes you ask now?" I replied, "Why couldn't you ask me all this time? I have had enough of you and your mother. All I have to tell you is that if another girl comes to take my place, don't torture her in the same way."

"Won't you forgive me?" he asked. I answered: "Now you, know that my people are coming to settle the matter, so you are trying to get round me!" He tried to persuade me: "When they come, don't speak against me."

Then I vowed: "Until they come and settle the matter, I will not drink water

with my own hands. Either I will stay here with dignity or I will leave. I can't live here like a dog."

I had vowed not to drink water with my own hands and no one in house would offer me water. One day, while I was standing at the well, I asked a chamar woman to give me water, and she did. My mother-in-law caught hold of my hair and dragged me away, saying: "You whore, now you have started drinking water touched by chamars! Why don't you produce that child yours?" I retorted: "What can I do? Do you want me to die of thirst?" She picked up a stone and hit me on the shoulder.

Some of the neighbouring women gathered and spoke up. One of them said: "How long are you going to keep suffering? you are a young woman—can't you control this old woman? Even when she got your father beaten up, you just watched and didn't raise a finger." When I saw that the neighbours were with me, I said: "Mother, if you have any self respect, let go of my hair." She immediately tied up her petticoat and began to cry out: "Chauderewari is coming into me. I will kill you!"

I screwed up my courage and I also cried out: "Nagarkotwari goddess is coming into me!" and I picked up a stone and flung it on to the tin roof. Then I caught hold of my mother-in-law and pinned her to the wall. She began to cry: "Let me go", but I said: "I'll let you go only if you promise not to torment me in future." I thought that in any case my life was worse than death, so even if I had to spend the rest of my years in jail, she should be taught a lesson that day. I didn't let go of her till she promised to leave me alone in future.

When my husband came home, she came with a scythe in her hand and shouted: "This she-elephant you have kept here has been beating me all day", and began to show her scratched arms. My husband said to her: "If this is true, I'll cut off both her hands, but first let me hear the neighbours confirm that she has really beaten you." I took him to the woman who had advised me to resist. She said to him: "So today you have seen

your mother's bruises? How come you never saw the bruises on your wife's back for eight years? She didn't beat her, we got her beaten up."

When the panchayat met the following Sunday, nobody was ready to speak in favour of my in-laws. Finally, one man said to me: "Daughter, why don't you ask pardon?" My relatives answered him: "Why should she ask pardon? Who has she murdered? She has tolerated for eight years what no other girl would have tolerated for eight days or eight hours. She knows what she has suffered. Now if you want her to stay in your house she will stay only on



Selma Waldman

condition that if you say one word to her, she is entitled to say a dozen in reply."

At this, my husband began to ask forgiveness. It was decided that my husband and I would live separately in an adjoining hut.

After this, when my mother-in-law tried once or two to play her old games, I also began giving her tit for tat. I rolled my eyes and said that the Nagarkotwari goddess had taken possession of me. My mother-in-law told my husband: "Stick a needle into her. If she is really possessed by the goddess, she won't scream." My husband pierced my thigh with a needle (showing the scar) but I thought: "Now that I have borne so much, this is nothing", and I didn't scream. He rubbed my nose with red

chillis but I kept rolling my eyes and didn't let myself sneeze. Then I told off my mother-in-law: "Why did you torment your daughter-in-law? What harm had she done to you?" and I also let the cat out of the bag by saying: "What did you do with your brother-in-law? How dare you call your daughter-in-law names?"

My husband sat and listened with folded hands. He really believed that the goddess was speaking. In fact, he still thinks that it was the goddess, but I know that all these stories of people getting possessed by spirits are nothing but a pack of lies. One day she was pretending to be possessed, so I said to my husband: "If it is a goddess, ask her how many coins you have in your closed fist. After all, a goddess knows the future and the past", so he asked: "Tell me how much money I have in my pocket?" She said: "10 or 15 rupees", but he had 47! The neighbours, who were watching, said: "So you get possessed by the goddess only to defame your daughter-in-law, do you?" After that, she couldn't have her way.

Today, I can say what I please and go where I like. My husband never questions me about it. We lived outside Delhi for some time, and I began to study. I took a course in sewing at the ITI. Now I stitch clothes on my machine, and earn about Rs 250 a month. I do all the housework and all the outside work as well, like getting the ration card made, paying the bills and so on, yet I also make time for this stitching work. I put my earnings in my own bank account.

Of course, I do still have to fight many battles. For instance, I always maintain that a woman has equal rights in the house and is joint owner of all the household goods. One day my husband got into a temper and said: "Fine, if you have equal rights, then contribute equally to the household expenditure."

I answered: "Sure, I am quite ready to contribute half the expenditure but on one condition. You will cook one meal every day and I will cook the other. Since there are three children, you can take two of them along with you to work one day, and one of them the following day." Then



he realized and said: "No no, you need not contribute half the expenditure." After all, does all the work that a woman does in the house have no price, no value?

One day I came tired and found that the house had not been cleaned so I asked my son Raju: "Why haven't you swept the house?" My husband intervened, saying: "Raju hasn't signed a contract that he will sweep the house every day!" I answered: "True, neither have I signed such a contract," and I went and lay down. When he saw that I was not going to cook the dinner, he cooked it, ate, fed the children, and went off to sleep. Later at night, I started feeling hungry so I went into the kitchen, but there was no food left. There was some milk so I boiled rice, ate it with the milk and went to sleep.

I have now decided that whether he eats or doesn't eat, I will definitely have all my meals. Even when he storms out without eating," I eat my food. These men can go and eat outside, but who will feed us women? If we work all day, we must eat too.

All these questions are now debated in my neighbourhood. I go to meetings and when I come back, I start discussing these issues. At one meeting, I heard that there are fewer women than men in the country's population, and the number of women is declining. When I came home and talked about it, there was a lot of disagreement among the neighbours. They said: "No, no, there are more women in the country! Just go into any market, you will see many more women walking around." My husband too said: "Yes, there must be more women", and he started counting the number of sons and daughters in the families we know. I replied: "Maybe there are more women in the marketplace but just go and look at any wine shop. You will see only men there. In the marketplace there are some men, but in wine shops or gambling dens, you won't find a single woman!" That evening, when our neighbour asked my husband: "What do you think? Are there more women or more men?" my husband answered: "The truth is that in good places you will find more women, and in bad places more men!"

All the men in this locality call me names. They think that I am very bold

and cunning, and that I try to incite their women. There is a custom in this colony that no woman should sit on the charpai in front of a man. When men are around, women always sit on the ground. I refuse to follow this custom. I sit on the charpai. There have been many quarrels over this. When I refuse to be convinced, these people get irritated and say: "All right, at least don't sit on our charpais", so I sit on my own!

I am always getting into confrontations with the men. Once, the boys here were trying to harass and defame a young girl who was a new resident of the colony. One day, we both were washing clothes at the tap. I didn't even know the girl. Suddenly, some boys started teasing her and calling out: "Hello Bobby!" I shouted at them: "How dare you harass her like that? Don't you have sisters at home?" Well, after that all these men have nicknamed me "Bobby." This incident occurred six years ago but they still have not stopped calling me Bobby!

Actually, these men get upset because I don't get easily scared. They can't frighten me. I go alone anywhere, at any time—to government offices, to hospitals. I get work done. All those years, I fended for myself, went to the hospital alone, so now I don't feel afraid. I am not afraid to speak out either. For instance, over the issue of the toilets. All the people in this colony use the public toilets. One night, I saw a big political leader of this area emerging from a ladies toilet. I chided him: "What are you doing in the ladies' toilet?"

He said: "Sorry, daughter, I didn't realize."

I said: "It is written in bold letters on the signboard, and there's a tubelight as well. How come you didn't realize? If a lady had been found in gents' toilet, you would have paraded her round the colony, called her names, made it impossible for her to continue living here. But a man can get away with anything. How is it that a man's mistake is treated as just a mistake but a woman's mistake becomes her downfall?"

You can imagine how men react when I talk like this! They call my husband "the slave of his wife." He retorts by saying: "Yes, I am her slave. Let me see which of you is able to stop me."

How do the women react? They come to me with all their problems, they don't call me Bobby and other such names. But the trouble is that if they start getting too friendly with me, their husbands start becoming hostile. If their husbands get hostile to them, what will they eat. They just have to keep their husbands happy, so they echo their husbands' nonsensical talk. But whenever they have a problem, they always come to me.

I have battled against many problems. It was like emerging from a sea of difficulties. Today, I am in a better situation. I can say what I please, I can go where I please.

I wish women would not commit suicide. I wish they would, somehow or other, in whatever way possible, keep fighting, keep living... □

## Emerging From Silence

*Meena is a 15 year old harijan girl who lives in a village near Bilaspur, Faridkot. On the afternoon of September 15, 1982, a constable took her to Budhnikala police station, for interrogation in a case being investigated. No policewoman was present. A few hours later, when Meena was released, she was not in a condition to speak to anyone. She stayed at home for three days, but was unable to move around because of extreme physical discomfort. On the 18th day, she was taken to the government hospital at*

*Bilaspur, where a doctor who is active in the civil rights movement, spoke to her and found out that she had been raped by two constables. She was so terrified that she could hardly relate the incident. The doctor had her medically examined, and then called together the villagers and told them the facts. The local people were enraged, and decided to gherao the police station until the concerned constables were arrested.*

—Chaman Lal  
(translated from Hindi)