



PILAR

Risking Life To Give Life

TO BECOME pregnant in a village like ours is to risk your life. In the last few months, three of my friends had a very bad time during delivery. Two of them died and the third suffered a lot.

Chandu was from our village, Lonjo, and was married into another village. When she became pregnant, and was sick, she came back to her mother's house.

She was sick, on and off, for about two months. There is a strong belief amongst the women here that when you are pregnant, you should not take any medicine at all. When the delivery approached, she became unconscious, with the result that the baby died before it was born and Chandu died a couple of days after.

The village men say that one day, while Chandu was bathing at the pond, an old woman asked her for some soap which she refused to give, so the woman cast the "evil eye" on her and killed her.

Toyo was a beautiful young girl, full of life. She became pregnant by the village headman. He was already married

but her family forced him to keep her in his house.

From that day on, she was very unhappy. When she became sick towards the end of her pregnancy, no one took care of her. In this area, Singhbhum, malaria is rampant and a bout of this illness often complicates pregnancy. The baby died and Toyo too died after a couple of days.

At Toyo's burial the women were very angry with the headman. In the midst of a profound silence, a voice shouted : "You know how to live with women but you don't know how to take care of them." It was the first time a woman dared to say such a thing, and she said it to the headman of the village. That woman paid for her boldness. She was slapped in public.

A little later, when the headman, according to Ho tribal custom, gave a cloth to cover Toyo's corpse, another woman took it and tore it up, saying : "You never bought a cloth for her when she was alive. What will she do with this new cloth now ?" Thus, women showed solidarity in expressing their anger against the way they are treated in tribal society.

The third case is that of—I could not find out her name because no one in the village knows it—a woman called "the woman under the mango tree." Everyone knows that mango tree but no one knows the woman's name. Is it that a tree is more important than a woman ?

She went into labour in the eighth month of pregnancy. The baby was not

in the right position. She was in pain for three days.

Both the local midwife and the nurse-midwife from the primary health centre were unable to deal with the situation.

The woman's husband was be-wildered. People advised him to take her to the doctor, eight kilometres away, but no one was ready to lend him a bullock cart as a woman is considered impure at the time of delivery. Others said : "Medicine cannot help her. We must locate the person who is responsible for her suffering." Though it was impossible to find anyone to help carry her to the doctor, in a moment 20 men gathered outside her house to help find out the "guilty" one who had cast the evil eye on her. Inside the house, the woman, exhausted after three day of labour, was screaming in pain.

I began to tremble in anticipation of some other woman being branded a witch, but this time the "guilty" was a man who had wanted to marry her and, when she refused, had cursed her, saying: "You will bear your children in pain."

I still remember the sight of that woman after three days of agony. One hand of the baby had emerged as if it was calling to us but unable to reach us. On the fourth day, "the woman under the mango tree" was finally taken to hospital.

Drawing water at the well, a woman comments : "This is the life of a woman. Many are unable to survive the ordeal. Those who survive must soon start carrying water once again."