

SHE HAS A WOMAN'S STRENGTH

An Interview with Manjit Arya, Women's National Judo Champion

WOMEN are trained from childhood to make themselves look 'graceful', 'delicate', and to shrink from physical combat. We are encouraged to keep our bodies underdeveloped – narrow waist, slender legs, fragile wrists are supposed to be 'beautiful'. Think of the ancient Chinese, who bound women's feet to keep them tiny, thus crippling them for life – that was thought 'beautiful' too.

While boys build their muscles, girls deliberately eat less and exercise to 'reduce', that is weaken themselves so that muscular men should find them pretty! Helplessness is supposed to be 'feminine' – no man likes an independent woman who can look after herself.

Manjit Arya, an 18-year-old student of German at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, is one girl who in her own quiet, unassuming way, has been disproving the popular idea that "men are naturally stronger than women." She is discovering and using the hidden resources of strength in her body and mind which, she insists, every woman can do.

Manjit, when and how did you first take up judo?

I had never heard of judo or any marital art until I joined JNU. My elder brother told me judo classes were being held at the university, and it was very useful for girls, especially as a lighter person can easily learn to throw a heavier. I went and just watched the class for about 15 days and was impressed because I realized what a good means of self defence it was.

Had you ever felt the need for self-defence ?

Sure I had. I don't think there's any girl who hasn't felt it – even little girls a few years old are molested.

How had you reacted when teased ?

Kept mum – what else ? 99 per cent of girls even today find that the only

thing to do. We're helpless. We can't even tell our own parents because of shyness.

Did you find it difficult learning judo?

It's only the first week that is difficult. One has to practise 40 exercises 10 times each every day, that is, 400 a day. If one has not been used to any kind of physical exercise, one has aches and pains all over – arms, legs, stomach. That's the time most girls drop out. It was easier for me because I was already an athlete. I'd won many inter-school and All India Kendriya Vidyalaya javelin and discus throw meets.

How many girls were there in your class?

There were about 20 girls to begin with. Only 10 finished the three months course. Three did the six month course.



Manjit Arya

Three did the six month course and at the end of the year only I was left.

Why did the other two drop out ?

I suppose they thought they'd learnt enough and could defend themselves. But unless you practice rigorously, your reflexes won't be quick enough. When

you're faced with an actual situation, there's no time to think. If you're in practice, you react automatically and quickness is all that counts at such moments.

When the other two girls who were with me dropped out, I too stopped going to class, I thought there would now be no one for me to practise with. The instructor used to demonstrate a throw on a boy and then ask the girls to try it out with each other. That was because the girls might have felt shy doing it with a boy. When I stopped, my instructor T.K. Rajan insisted I should go and at least practise the exercises. When I went, he put me against a boy. I was slightly nervous but took courage and defended myself. It was a bit difficult at first because all the boys had completed a year's training, some even two or three years, and I'd been at it only six months. However, I held my own and by the time I completed nine months, I could tackle and of them.

Tell me about the championship.

I'd been under training only two months when I won the gold medal in the open weight category of the Delhi State Championship, in October 1977. The next year, I won two gold medals in the open weight and in my own weight (45-50) categories, in the Delhi State Championship. In February 1979 were the National Games where all the State Champions took part, and I won the gold medal.

Have you ever used judo to defend yourself on the streets ?

Oh yes. One night at nine p.m. I went for a walk with my two sisters. Papa objected but we insisted on going. About a kilometer from the house, a man on a cycle said something insulting. I said, "Look friend, you'd better be careful. It's my policy never to start a fight but if you start it, I won't let you get away with it."

He started getting more aggressive, so I just caught hold of his collar. He couldn't move – he was in my grip and stood there trembling.

The other time was last year. I was coming from the bus stop at 4.30 pm and there were 15 boys in a line, blocking the road! I was slightly nervous but there was no point showing it. So I pushed one aside, saying "Excuse me, please" and walked past. Ten steps and one of them whizzed past on a cycle, touching

my cheek as he went. I knew what they were after – they had seen my demonstration at Chanakya theatre a month before and since then, every time they saw me on the street, had been remarking. "Huh! Thinks she's learning judo and karate!" I had ignored all that but this physical touch was direct provocation. I ran after the cycle and pulled the pillion rider off. He immediately folded his hands : "Sister, I haven't done anything." This was true enough so I left him standing there and pursued the cyclist who had now put on speed. Well,

I'm used to jumping onto DTC buses, so a cycle was nothing!

I gave him a push and he went spinning into the drain. Then I caught hold of him and

gave him two or three blows (I'd been learning karate for a couple of months). He took to his heels.

I took his cycle home, thinking, "Well, my fine fellow, where will you go as long as I have your bike?" We took it to the police station. Those two men were notorious goondas of the locality, known to be knifers. They were caught and fined Rs. 100 and Rs. 50 each for eve-teasing. Since then, no one dares tease me or my sisters.

Her father who was listening to the conversation, put in : Last week, we went to our village Katlupur, district Sonapat, Haryana. There was a dispute with our neighbours who were forcibly building a wall on our land. When we objected, they grew violent and 15 of them, men and women, came at us, armed with lathis and pitchforks. My eldest son and I withdrew. There was no one to fight for us. Manjit was left all alone. She faced

them, encountered some and forced the others to retreat. She has a man's strength.

How do the girls in this area react to all this ?

At least 25 of them have come to me and asked me to start a club here to teach them judo. But hiring and equipping a hall will be far too expensive. That's one of the main problems. Most girls who can afford to learn are from rich families. I taught at YWCA for three months. The fees were high – Rs. 25 a month, and then getting the dress made, plus transport – it's too much for a lower middle class family. Even in this area, we're all government servants' families, who can barely make both ends meet.

My students were fairly preserving. 25 began the course, 10 completed it. Of these, one won a gold medal and one a silver at the Delhi State Championship, 1978. I'd learnt a little ju-jitsu and girls were more interested in it, because it's aggressive, while judo is purely a self defence technique.

Have all your students been young girls ?

Most of them, yes. But at YWCA, there was one lady who had a daughter my age. She never complained or asked to go slower than the others. She finished the whole course. Age or build don't court. **Judo is purely a matter of technique, not strength.**

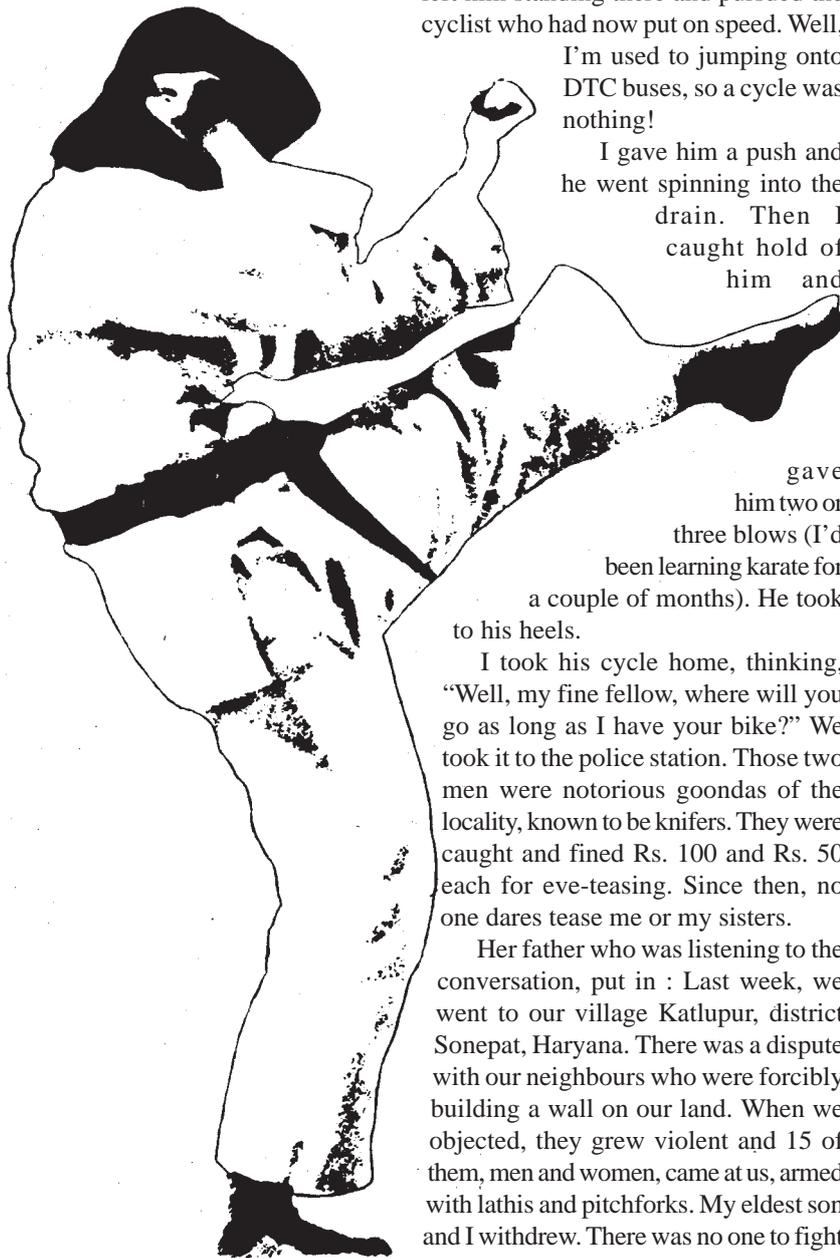
Is it possible to practise during menstruation ?

Sure. It's never bothered me. I continue to practise. Before I took up judo, I used to worry lest I get my period during an athletic meet. I would take steps to postpone it. But now I find it makes no difference. It's matter of how much you want to do a thing – it all depends on your will and determination.

Has learning judo brought about any changes in your personality ?

She pauses for a moment : I don't think so. I mean, I have no wish to order people about or act rudely and aggressively.

I meant, has it made you more confident, less shy about say, speaking



in class or things like that ?

She smiles : Oh, yes, definitely. Though I studied in a coeducational school, I always kept away from the boys. If I was asked to deliver a message to one of them, I'd go and stand in front of him and say (she mimics in an army-drill voice) : "Vikram, you've been asked to give such a book to so-and-so", and walk away at once without waiting for an answer. Now I'm ready to shake hands with any chap! It's partly the atmosphere of JNU and partly getting to see there's not much difference between boys and girls.

Has it made a difference in your family's attitude to you ?

Well, my Papa still doesn't like me to be out after dark. I feel absolutely

confident and he too knows there's no danger – at best, I'll come home after teaching someone a lesson. But still, you see, all parents think like that – that we are after all "still girls"?

Do you insist on going out ?

I never miss a programme just because there'd be objections at home. I go – if there's trouble I can look after that.

Who takes the important decisions affecting you ?

I have always taken my decisions myself. That's my nature perhaps. One of my sisters is also like that, the other is not.

I ask to see some photographs. She shows them to me, also a book on judo. It has many pictures of men but not one

of a woman.

She laughs : Books are not much use. Practice is what counts. It's the same with women's liberation also. I don't like those who have only theory, theory, all the time and no practice!

What are your plans for the future, Manjit ?

This is my last year to complete the course in German. When I am 20, I'll sit for the IPS exam. I'd like to train police-women in the marital arts.

Her eyes light up and she waves her arms eloquently : I want all these boys to be in line! No more eve teasing. Boys have to be changed – for that we need many more policewomen. And every girl, every woman, must learn to defend herself.



Woman to Woman

I have to begin, faltering,
writing this letter, overdue –

how shall I begin without regret
after so many centuries' delay?

And how shall I say
what the heart feels yet

in spite of all the guilt and fear and pain,
in spite of having said

"This can't be true,
it's a mistake."

Yes, though our minds might label it,
trap, capture, shut it in dark rooms
and call it fake,

I've found a window to learn out
and call to you,
to whisper and to shout

that I – I need new words –
that I love you.

Ruth Vanita

Lucky Break

By day I'll offer you sympathy
for acidity

night, I'll keep vigil
on your magic glass –

won't it somehow empty itself
even in optical illusion?

I'll give up my job,
make you a better living

as liberated women do
in exchange markets.

Trading with sodabottlewalas –
between deals, juggling bottlecaps;

star of the show,
applauded through every act.

Believe me, our lucky break will soon start.
Apart.

Meera Dewan