



Shanta Devi

WHEN I was a child, I hated all women. This was because my mother had left me. She ran away from my father. That was in Myomay, in Burma, in the forties.

Since I was a dirty, unkempt child the neighbours would taunt me. The Hindu women of the neighbourhood would not let me play with their children. My father would try to bathe me but he was very rough. I would cry and he would curse.

One day, when this was going on, a Muslim woman offered to look after me. After that, for a year and a half, until she died, this woman would bathe me, comb my hair, care for me. Because of her I still have a soft spot for Muslims.

My father was a Nepali brahman. He was arrogant about his caste. He had married beneath him, my mother being a rajput, a *chhatrani*. He would not eat *kacha khana* cooked by her. My older brother, my sister and I were looked down upon by his people because we were the children of a lower caste woman. This hurt me very much. At six, I took a vow that when I grew up I would eat with harijans !

After my mother ran away he married

again. My stepmother was a brahman girl of 14, the same age as my sister. When the second world war broke out, our family had to flee Burma. We came to Dehradun where my father found a job. But things were not the same. In Burma we had a small hotel and were quite well off. In Dehradun we had nothing. It soon became clear that my stepmother did not want me in the house. She would not cook for me. I began earning a living by doing crochet work.

At 17, I was married off to a man twice my age. My father insisted on the match because the man did not want a dowry or a fancy wedding. In any case, I was fed up of living with my stepmother so I agreed. Later, I found out that my husband had two wives living in Nepal and had left a third dead in Burma.

But at that time I had many foolish, romantic notions. I was going to be the ideal wife. I thought I would make a heaven of my home. I was a *pativrata*, I prayed daily, I wanted to be Sita. We all have our dreams.

But my husband was no Ram. I soon discovered that he had illegal dealings. He worked for a businessman and made a lot of money on the side. I was scared he would be caught. I used to pray that he be dismissed from his job before they found out. Ultimately, he did lose that job.

I never fought with my husband. But sometimes when he did wrong things, I would speak out. Then he would beat me. He bought a dairy and began to sell milk. He would mix water in it—this I

could not bear. I could not cheat people. In fact I used to give away milk and *ghee*. By now I was the mother of four children, and a fifth was on the way. My neighbour too was pregnant. I would give her milk. When my husband found out, he started keeping a watch on milk consumption at home. So I would mix water in the milk in order to stretch it out and feed my neighbour !

I told you I used to be religious. I prayed daily and offered water to the sun god- I offered flowers. I read the Gita every morning. I loved *bhajan kirtan*. Music has great power over me. One morning, I heard a *kirtan* in the distance and spontaneously told my husband I wanted to attend it. He replied : "Go, run to them, all those people who do *kirtan* are your husbands, aren't they ?"

I was shocked by this blasphemy and cursed him : "May there be no wood for your cremation, no cloth for your funeral, irreligious man !" I did not know then that curses can come true.

At that time my husband was a rich man. He had acquired 60 buffaloes. But he fell into bad habits, took to gambling and let his business slide. Debts mounted and everything was sold to pay his creditors—the buffaloes, the household goods, the 50 *tolas* of gold I possessed. Even the nosering I wore had to be sold. I bailed him out many times but he always went back to gambling. When I lost everything, people were sorry for me but I was not sorry. I took it all in my stride. I used to say : "*Dudh ka dudh, pani kapani ho gaya.*" "*Pap to*

*kata, shukr hai*”, I would console myself.

But with my husband in and out of jail I had to earn a living for myself, my six children and the seventh in my stomach. I began knitting sweaters for the neighbours, at Rs 5 per sweater. I had only four years of schooling but I began giving tuitions to children. The neighbours would pay me in kind. Some would give me fuel-wood, some food. Every night I would buy four rupees’ worth of *gram* and soak it. In the morning, the children would drink tea and eat the boiled *gram* before going to school. Between seven of us, I could only afford half a kilo of flour daily. Often I would send the children to the *langar* at the local *gurdwara* and go hungry myself.

One day, my husband came home in my absence. By then, we had only one quilt left in the house, which we would all huddle under at night. He walked off with it. When I heard what had happened, I ran after him like a mad woman. By the time I found him, it was too late. He had already sold the quilt.

Most people are scared of the police but policemen have been very good to me. Because of my husband I had frequent dealings with the local police station. I began to teach the head constable’s children. When I needed Rs 5 for my daughter’s examination fee, it was he who gave it to me. Even today, in the course of my work in the slums, I do not hesitate to take people to a police station to lodge an FIR or to make enquiries.

The next time my husband was released he did not return home but began working in a shop. His condition was so pathetic that I thought it was my duty to bring him home. Besides, I thought it was better to have a husband, otherwise people would take advantage of my situation. They say, “*Garib kijoru sab ki bhabhi.*”

By now I had a job teaching in a school for Rs 30 a month. My eldest son had also found some kind of job. I fetched my husband, and made him promise before the head constable that

he would reform, otherwise my children and I would commit suicide. He agreed to change his ways.

All this time, I had never loved my husband, never desired him. Now, I had a change of heart. I began to care for him. But soon after he came back he fell ill and was hospitalised. In hospital when I went to see him he slipped some money out of my purse. That money I had borrowed, scraped and saved to apply for the Bidya Binodini teachers’ examination. I was so angry I did not go to see him again. Eventually, I relented but the day I finally went, all I saw was his dead face.

They told me in hospital that he spoke a great deal about me. He used to say: “My wife is very good. She is a goddess. One day she will shine like the moon.” “*Men aurat bahut achchi hai, voh devi hai, ek din voh chand ki tarah chamkegi.*” This one phrase has sustained me ever since. But, also, as I had predicted, we had to beg and borrow for his funeral. He died without a paisa. In the end I had my revenge on him. Hit it was a terrible revenge.

Today, I say to younger women, do not look for happiness in marriage. There is nothing to be found there. My children get embarrassed and angry at the things I say about their father but it is only the truth.

A little before my husband’s death, a man whose children I taught tried to take advantage of me. I lost that job. This bitter experience and my husband’s death changed me a lot.

I am no longer Shanti meaning peace. I have changed my name to Shanta, with an ‘a’ at the end. I do not want to be Shanti because my peaceloving, trusting nature ruined me. If I had been less patient with my husband, with others, my life might have been different. Now I no longer keep quiet or take things lying down. I fight for myself and for others. Today, I am strong, I have been toughened by life, I have struggled a lot.

After my husband’s death, a son was born to me. I completed the Bidya Binodini course and began to teach in

school. Even then I did not have enough to eat. I would walk two miles to school on an empty stomach, sustaining myself on basil leaves or a hunk of jaggery.

My small son died. I fell into debt. My elder son had begun to earn by now but he stopped giving me money. My other children also fought with me. My daughter was having a love affair and did not like being kept watch on.

All my life I had lived for my children but their behaviour broke my heart. I went to live in an *ashram*. I wanted to take *sanyas* but they said I was not old enough. It was a neighbour, Jagdish, who brought me to his home. He was like an adopted son. Eventually, he married my second daughter, despite my sons’ opposition. Jagdish had a government job and got transferred to his native place. He also got TB. I went with him to look after him. My daughter stayed back to finish her BA.

His people did not approve of the marriage. The neighbours would mock: “What has Jagdish’s wife brought in dowry?” I would reply: “I have come in dowry.” It was years before my daughter and I were accepted by that family. At one point my daughter, who by then had a good government job, wanted to walk out of the marriage. It took all my tact to keep the marriage together, for the sake of their child. Now they are quite happy.

After we came to Delhi I found my job with Ankur, a literacy organisation. Teaching is like second nature to me. At first I was a teacher in one of the Ankur slum centres. Today, in addition, I am a supervisor of eight centres. I earn Rs 650 a month and if I knew English I would earn more. I still support one son, who is in college. My daughters are all married. My sons and daughters-in-law are reconciled to me and have great respect for me.

The work I do is dear to me. As an upper caste child, I wanted to re-play with harijan children. Today, I work in their slums, eat with them, educate them. I am close to the poor because I know their anguish. That is where my heart lies. With ordinary people.”