

## They Called Her A Stone...

AFTER completing my M Phil, I decided to get married to a person who, I intuitively felt, would stand by me in my struggle for freedom for myself and my society. Today, after five years, during which I have had to be constantly vigilant to guard my hard won freedom, I can say that my intuition has been justified.

After marriage, we decided not to have a child until both of us completed our studies. But, in our society, young people are not given any knowledge about marital life. All I knew was the advertisements I had seen in buses: "A safe and easy way..." One day, I felt sick and went to a doctor in a government hospital. I was told that I had conceived. I told the doctor that I did not want a child, and that I had conceived due to some manufacturing defect in the contraceptive. Also, I was bleeding a little.

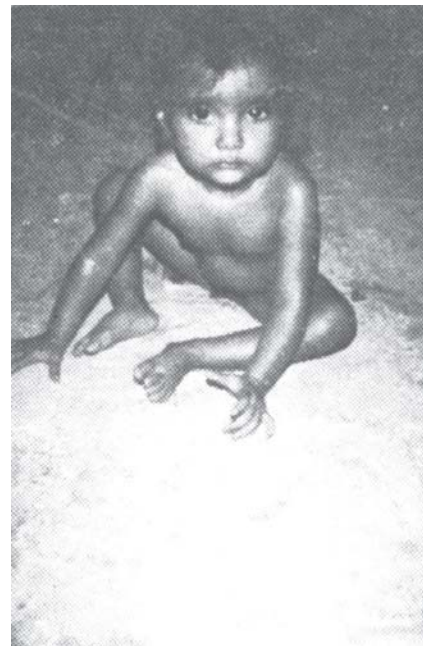
But she replied dryly: "Come, come get up, nothing can be done now." I said: "I want a medical termination of pregnancy." She asked how many children I had. When I said I had none, she began to scold me as though I had committed a great sin or had abused her. I went home and my husband advised me to go back to the doctor and explain that I had conceived not due to carelessness or by choice but by an unfortunate accident.

The next day, I went again and met two doctors. Both of them scolded me and said: "Why should we sin? This is considered unethical in our profession." I asked: "Is it not unethical to give birth to an unwanted child conceived by mistake?" Both together said: "Get out,

don't bother us. If you are so determined, go to a private doctor." I said I could not afford to do so, as both of us were still studying. At this, they whispered to each other: "She may not be married at all." I was not wearing a *mangalsutra*, red bangles, *bindi* or any other sign of marriage. However, I took advantage of the situation and said: "If you think I am unmarried, then abortion is my legal right." At this, they grew enraged and said: "Do what you please, don't bother us."

When I went again the next day, they asked me to bring my father or brother. I refused to do so, and offered to bring my husband. They said: "How can we know whether the man you bring is in fact your husband?" I was deeply grieved at their inhumanity, harsh and insulting behaviour and unwillingness to listen to my viewpoint. Anyway, I was unable to explain them how a woman feels when she has to perform the great task of childbearing when she does not wish to and is not mentally prepared to do so.

I gave birth to a girl. We named her Manushi. I, my husband and all members of our family were very happy. She was born in a hospital in Hissar. We distributed sweets to the nurses and other hospital staff. All of them reacted as if we were doing something strange and laughable. The next day, another woman in the hospital gave birth to a boy. When the nurses asked her for a tip, she unwillingly gave them Rs 5. They said: "This is not enough. Yesterday, the parents of a girl gave us Rs 15 each." The woman replied: "Perhaps they were unable to have a child for a long time,



**Baby Manushi**

that is why they have given Rs 15 even though a girl was born." When the nurse said that was not the case, the woman turned her face away as if we had done something disgusting.

We are acquainted with two families of doctors in that town. My husband visited them and gave them boxes of sweets. They did not even listen carefully to his announcement that a girl had been born. They merely assumed that since sweets were being distributed, a boy must have been born. They rang up their parents and told them to visit us and congratulate us on the birth of a son. When their parents came to see us, bringing a present of money for the child and heard that we had a girl child, they were terribly embarrassed and began to justify their visit by saying that they had assumed, because of our distributing sweets, that we had a son. They felt this was some sort of ill omen and thought we would perhaps be annoyed by their having come to congratulate us on a girl's birth, so they hurriedly left without giving anything to our daughter.

Several months later, a female relative of ours came to visit us. While talking to

my mother-in-law, she remarked: “*Nani*, could I ever imagine that one day, I too would have children? When, the first two times, I gave birth to stones, I wept day and night, wishing that I had been fortunate enough to have a child.” I felt very sorry for her and asked how she had given birth to stones and whether she had got herself checked up. She replied angrily: “I had stones just as you had a stone.” When I understood her meaning, I felt as if a heavy stone had fallen on my head. My face grew red with anger, astonishment and sorrow that she could call my daughter a stone. Tears came to my eyes at the thought that in our society, a woman, a mother, can call her daughter a stone. Ignoring my reaction, she ended her story by saying that her second daughter was a blessing in disguise because she died and after her death two children (sons) were born.

One day, when my daughter was one and a half years old, she fell ill. My father-in-law took her to the doctor and pleaded with him, saying: “Please cure this child. She is as good as a grandson to me.” The doctor replied: “Comrade *saheb*, don’t worry. Even if you fling a girl into a bramble bush, she will survive. It is boys who are not only hard to get but who die of the slightest sickness.” However, he began to treat our daughter, but that night our very dear daughter, our much loved daughter, left us and went away. Our daughter who used to dance to the tunes on the transistor, who used to run to show us the picture of a cow in her book as soon as a calf entered the field,



**Rajbala and her husband with their baby daughter**

who used to run to embrace her grandfather’s legs, went away. Our feelings on losing her were unbearable, inexpressible.

But when our fellow villagers came to condole with us, their words, which still resound in my ears, were: “Stop crying now, she was a worm from hell and has gone back to hell.” Another woman said: “Don’t sorrow so much, she was a tempest. After the tempest comes the rain (a son).” A third said: “How unkind of god. This was not so precious a thing that he needed to take it away.” Yet another said: “You must have committed some sin in your former birth. First you gave birth to a girl and then

god called her away.” A man who saw my father-in-law grieving was surprised and said:

“Comrade, a peasant is freed from the weight of seven births and goes straight to heaven if his daughter dies a virgin in her father’s house.” Every day, every moment, I remember my daughter and I also remember all the bitter words I heard, from her birth to the time of my separation from her, which renew my strength to fight against this society in which to give birth to a girl is considered the punishment for sins of a previous birth, and a girl’s death equivalent to paradise for her parents. □

(translated from Hindi)