



Another Raji

TODAY, after many days of persuasion by my husband, I went with him to village Itaunja, 20 kilometres from Lucknow, where he has recently bought a mango orchard. We started at 9 a.m., on a scooter. It was a warm day. As we approached the village, the metalled road gave way to a dirt road, passing between huts of mud and straw. Naked children, aged from two to 12, were bathing in small dirty ponds with buffaloes. In fields, and in front of houses, women worked, each of them accompanied by a small child. Many of them were pregnant.

My husband stopped near a big house, with mud walls and a wooden roof. It was a relatively prosperous house, with cows, goats and buffaloes in the courtyard and sacks of wheat, rice and potatoes in the verandah. My husband told me it was the house of Panditji, the former owner of the mango orchard. Panditji appeared in the doorway. Wearing a dhoti, he was plump, roundfaced, about 55 years of age. He welcomed us into his guest room, a neat room, coated with mud. In a corner, an old sick dog lay asleep.

Looking towards the inner verandah, Panditji ordered: "Bring tea quickly." I saw a slender, dark, charming woman, very

simple and innocent looking, about 25 years old. She was wearing a yellow cotton sari, her head was covered. She smiled at me. I went and sat near her while she made tea on a *chulha*, in an aluminium utensil. I began to ask her questions which she answered very hesitantly.

"What is your name?"

"Raji."

"How many years have you been here?"

"Since I was 12 or 13 years old. It was about 16 years ago."

"Are you his wife?"

"No, not his wife, but you can say so."

"How did it happen?"

"When I was a child, I was married to a farmer. But my father was poor and could not manage to give enough things when I was to go to the boy's house. So they did not agree to let me enter their house. My father died. I continued living with my brother. Panditji brought me to his house."

"Panditji must have his own family?"

"Oh, yes, his wife is very nice and simple. She lives with her three children in Lucknow. The children are quite grown up. She often visits this place. The children are respectful to me."

"How much work do you have to do?"

"Quite a lot. I get up at 4 a. m. and do all the milking, cleaning and feeding of the cattle. Then I prepare breakfast, wash

clothes, fetch water, and much else. How can I tell you everything? I am busy until late at night."

"You are a hard worker!"

"I have to be. How else can I survive?"

"Do you have a child?" "Oh no, I haven't any." "You never conceived?" "Yes, many times. But each time, Panditji took me to a hospital and got the child aborted. He said he has three children and does not want any more. I am not of his caste. Also, my child will create problems when the property is distributed."

"Didn't the abortions make you weak?"

"Yes, after each abortion I felt very unwell. I could not perform my duties. But after some days, everything became normal. Panditji has started using Nirodh so I have some relief."

"Do you want to have a child?"

"Yes, I want, My body wants, my heart wants, my soul wants, but can I get everything I want? I have to live here for the rest of my life. I have to do what he says. I have to obey his orders."

"Does he give you any money?"

"No, never. But he gives me things. This sari, these anklets and these bangles, he gave me last month."

"Do you visit your brother's house?"

"No. But, next month, my brother's son is getting married. I think I will be able to go then."

“Panditji is getting old. Has he given you some land or some cash so that you can survive when you are alone?”

“No, nothing so far.” “Does he beat you?”

“No, rarely. You know, he is very calm and simple.”

Just then, my husband called me to accompany him to the orchard. Walking behind Panditji and my husband, I saw a girl aged about 13, with her three brothers, emptying water from a deep pit into another. They were using aluminium bowls to transfer the water. It was a tiresome job, especially in the heat. Panditji explained to me that they were doing this so as to catch fish which they would find at the bottom of the pit.



Panditji called a pregnant woman, clad in rags, who was standing nearby with her children, to show us the fish. One of her sons went towards the pit but the owner of the pit called out: “Don’t touch the pit, we are Musalman.” Panditji explained that the girl is a Muslim and the woman a *natni*.

I felt a great desire to go and talk to her, who was gazing at me, inviting me, tempting me. But just then, my husband realised his status, position, business, and stopped me from going near her. When I persisted, he said: “He is saying you should not go so you must not go.” And I, M Sc, M Phil, mother of two children, wife of an engineer, another Raji, followed my husband along the sandy path. □

The government has just decreed that

You may never get all the facts about the murder of Indira Gandhi. You may never get to know who was really behind the massacre of innocent people in Bhiwandi or the anti Sikh violence of November 1984.

You may never get to know all the facts about who was responsible for the criminal negligence that resulted in the death and maiming of thousands of people in the Bhopal gas tragedy.

Our basic right to information, freedom of speech and expression was trampled upon when the government passed a new ordinance on May 15, 1986.

This ordinance was passed without the approval of parliament.

This ordinance decrees that the report of any Commission of Enquiry can be withheld from the people and the parliament whenever the government so desires.

This is a blatant attempt to keep the people and their representatives in the dark about many investigations of crimes, corruption, and incompetence.

We cannot be silent spectators to the systematic process of choking off our right to know.

We must demand of our elected representatives that they press for the withdrawal of this ordinance.

We must insist on their accountability to the people whom they are supposed to represent.

What Can You Do?

(1) Send letters of protest to your local MP and to the prime minister. Let them know you consider the ordinance an unconstitutional attack on your remaining human rights and another step toward the reimposition of the Emergency.

(2) Meet your local MP and ask him or her to press for the withdrawal of the ordinance. Invite him or her to a public meeting in your locality to debate the ordinance.

