

VASANTHA • • • • One Of Many

“Children, obey your parents..”

“Wives, submit yourselves unto your husbands as unto the Lord...”

“Let your women keep silent in the meetings for it is not given unto them to speak.”

This is the true story of Vasantha Jacob, a distant relative of mine. She grew up as the fourth daughter in a family of five girls and two sons. Her father was a clerk earning a very small salary; her mother stitched clothes for women in the locality to make both ends meet. There was a Tamilian Christian family, belonging to one of the small fanatical sects with which South India is littered.

Vasantha grew up in an atmosphere of rigid piety, where to “answer back” a parent was a sin, where family prayers were held morning and night, the girls sitting with covered heads, where all the children were expected to read the Bible, learn verses by heart and pray every day as a ritual and made to feel “wicked” if they neglected to do this. They attended services regularly twice a week. The women could only open their mouths to join in the singing. The rest of the time, they had to sit silent. Tiny children were expected to remain quiet through hour-long services. Mothers constantly admonished little girls to pull their skirts down, keep the scarves over their heads, not to fidget and not to fall asleep.

Their lives were hedged in by restrictions—they were never to wear jewels, cosmetics, short or sleeveless blouses, or even flowers in the hair. This, in Madurai, naturally isolated them from others. They were not to listen to the radio, not to read novels, and *never* to step into a cinema. All these were considered “worldly” whereas the children were to grow up in as “spiritual” a manner as possible.

Of all the girls, Vasantha was the most outgoing. She had more friends at school, liked dressing up, and sang hymns pouring out all her youthful energy in not too passive a manner. She giggled a lot, laughed loudly in spite of being told not to, and was a “real chatterbox” as her mother said with a sad smile.

Vasantha’s older brothers got scholarships, studied medicine, and got jobs outside Madurai. Gradually, they moved out of the direct control of the religious leaders and began to lead lives of their own. But the girls were a terrible problem for their mother—how was she to find husbands for all of them? While they were still studying, she began the hunt. She often poured out her problems to other women of the family: “It’s terribly difficult to find good Christian boys these days. They’re all so ungodly. And you know, Mr Jacob has retired now and is getting hardly Rs 50 as pension. Who will look after these girls? David’s wife is a very clever woman. She doesn’t let him send a penny. When I wrote once, he got angry and said: ‘Who asked you to produce so many children if you couldn’t look after them?’ This is the way he talks.”

Vasantha passed SSC, learnt typing and got a job in a bank. Her sisters too were working. All four girls used to bring their salaries and give them to their mother. She would buy for them whatever they needed. It was on their earnings that the house was being run; they did all the housework too, yet their mother could not be at peace. The girls were growing older and older and were trapped in the common predicament of Indian Christian women—too few “eligible” middle class boys. Many



—Jolly

Christian boys marry non-Christian girls but rarely are Christian girls allowed to meet, much less marry, boys from other communities.

A huge dowry is expected among South Indian Christians. Where could their mother find enough for five girls? And yet, she would tell my grandmother: “I want to find boys who will have good jobs so that the girls don’t have to work after marriage. Vasantha always says: Amma, I’m not going to work after marriage. I’ve been working so many years—I’m tired now.”

A boy was finally located who was willing to marry Vasantha without dowry. She was 25 years old, and her older sisters were already past “marriageable” age. But alas! after the engagement, the boy did not turn out to be too good a Christian, though a kind and good person, as everyone acknowledged. He even told Vasantha that he was not interested in attending church, though she was quite free to do so. The engagement was broken off. So the search began anew. And another man was found. 15 years older than Vasantha, he came from a poor family, but had a fairly good job in a private company at Bombay. This time, her mother didn’t enquire too closely into his religious beliefs. The parents were pious people—

that was enough. The wedding took place amid great rejoicing.

They had been married for two years. She had a baby boy, Philip. But Vasantha could not leave her job. Mathai had married her on condition that she would continue to work. So she got a transfer to Bombay. Then the trouble began. Vasantha's aunt who lived near her, used to bring reports: "It seems he can't get on with his boss in the office. He's very hot-tempered."

And a few days later, after a bitter argument, he just walked out of his job, and decided to go to one of the Gulf countries. Time passed, the going abroad became more and more of a dream, and Mathai was still sitting at home. Vasantha's family were very upset: "Poor girl, she has to do every single thing herself. She prepares food for him in the morning, gets the child ready and leaves for work. Then on the way back, she buys vegetables, comes home, cleans the house, cooks again, washes all the clothes, dishes, everything."

Vasantha herself never complains about her husband. Sometimes, relatives question her: "But doesn't Mathai do anything? Who brings the rations?"

"I bring them on Sunday."

"And milk?"

"Sometimes he brings it if he feels like going out, otherwise I go with Philip."

"But why doesn't he look for a job?"

"So many people have suggested different jobs for him, but he says he won't accept any job for less than Rs 1,000 a month, otherwise he'll go abroad. But..."

Vasantha's aunt gets annoyed: "Why don't you ask him to help you in some work at least? Can't he do the shopping?"

She laughs deprecatingly. "What will he do? Even coffee he won't take himself."

I remember the last time we visited Vasantha's house. Mathai complained: "See, I placed this glass here three days ago, after drinking water. And she still hasn't taken it to the kitchen. I was watching to see when she'll do it."

I ask: "But how does he pass the time?"

Vasantha: "Reading books and magazines. He sleeps till late."

Her aunt butts in: "He's always in bed—whenever you go to their house. And drinks so much milk without bothering about even the child. I told him: 'You're growing very fat.' He just laughed: 'I feel weak!' And look at this poor girl—skin and bones."

Yes, Vasantha has become very thin. Her hair is heavily streaked with grey, even though she is only in her early thirties. Her face is wrinkled and tired. But premature age has not given her any independence. Whenever she comes to see us, she is in a hurry: "I have to go and cook. He'll be waiting" or "it's getting late. He'll shout." She has to give him accounts of how she spends every penny of her salary, which is the family's only income.

In the summer vacation, Vasantha was very anxious to visit her parents at Madurai. She had saved up the money from her salary. Mathai said he would not go as everyone there would ask why he was not working. The tickets were bought, they were busy packing, little Philip could hardly stop jumping with excitement. Vasantha went out to do some last-minute shopping for her sisters at home. Suddenly Mathai turned on his son: "You can tell your Amma if she goes anywhere, she can go but need not come back to this house." Philip burst into tears, Vasantha quietly unpacked the suitcases. "Never mention Madurai to me again", wept Philip. Vasantha remained silent.

She is always silent, smiling, busy, never raises her voice. She is indeed the "virtuous woman" of the Bible. The shell of herself—having lost her laughter and her tears.

Only in the religious services does she find an outlet. She has joined a sect whose members are supposed to be filled with the spirit of god. They pour out all their feelings spontaneously in tears, prayers, babbled words and hysteria. The last time I saw Vasantha, she was at

a service, singing with great fervour. I noticed what the words of each hymn were saying:

"God knows the way, he holds the key, He guides us with unerring hand, Some day with tearless eyes we'll see,
And then, yes then, we'll understand.

We'll know why clouds instead of sun

Hung over many a cherished plan...
Through all thy ways still sing his praise,

Some day, some time, we'll understand."

"Trust and obey, for there's no other way to be happy..."

And I thought of the generations of women taught not to think, not to question, but to obey, to suffer, to be exploited, all in the hope of "some day" finding a reward in heaven. I remembered Vasantha's usual answer when asked about her husband's behaviour: "It's God's will. Only God can change him." And her relatives smothering their anger: "We must keep praying for him. Prayer can work wonders."

Finally, of so many women I know, including my own grandmother, who lived like Vasantha as "good Christians" and towards the end of their lives, went out of their minds. Perhaps because madness is the only way a woman can be herself, can express her real feelings, her anger, her protest. Haven't the women who refused to do as they were told, always been called mad and abnormal?

As long as they are sane, they must keep smiling.

"Let your women be silent..." When will the Vasanthas of this world decide to speak? □

Reported by a woman student of the College of Architecture, Delhi

Male Teacher: Do you have a flat, a car and a girl?

Male student: No, Sir.

Teacher: I do. If you want to have all these things, study hard and become architect.