

The Sapling



“ARRE, look who’s here – Shanno Bibi! Come, come, don’t run away. Come and sit with us uneducated ones also, once in a while.” Bhabhi put her arm around me and drew me into the inner room where the women sit and chat.

“Arre, it’s Shanno! I thought Bhaggo had come. Come in, Shanno *beta* come in. Shail isn’t around today – she disappeared directly after lunch. What with this rain she hasn’t been able to go out the last three days. So today as soon as it stopped, off she went. You educated girls – you can’t stay at home a minute, no indeed – your feet start itching !” A note of complaint in Amma’s voice.

“So what if Shail isn’t here – we are.” Manjhli Bhabhi was winding wool with great dexterity. “Today, she’ll have a taste of our *panchayat*.”

“What’s happened to Bhaggo Bhabhi?” broke in Rameshwar’s mother. “She’s sure taking her own time today.”

“Yes, we’ll get to know what’s what only when Bhaggo shows up.” Amma had an idea. “Send one of the kids along to fetch her.”

Bhabhi went out but returned soon enough. “You’d better tell them yourself, Amma – a fat lot they listen to me. Playing madly like the little devils they are! Oof, the children of this house – call them children! They’re more like all hell let loose!”

At that moment, who should make her appearance but Bhaggo Bhabhi – lips

stained with *pan*, hands busy with crocket work. A wave of excitement ran through the group. Bhaggo Bhabhi first sent her ten years old daughter out to join the infant battalion and then put her son to sleep on the rug. Then, with a knowing smile: “So Amma, how goes it with your tenant upstairs?”

“Arre, forget about her. You tell us what’s been happening. After all, she lived right opposite your house.”

Every hand stopped its movement, all eyes were on Bhaggo Bhabhi.

“Arre *baba*, who’s going to go into that long tale. If it comes to knowing, I know every inch of it but who’d soil their mouth talking of such filth.”

“But there wasn’t even a father or mother-in-law to reckon with – just the two of them staying on their own. And the man earns well, isn’t bad to look at – then, what made that wretch run away?”

“That’s it, that’s what I can’t understand”, agreed Amma.

“It’s not hard to understand, Amma. Arre, do these educated misses stop at anything? Shanno Bibi, don’t mind my saying this, but this wretched education makes women forget duty, devotion, everything.”

“Oh come, why blame education? It’s a matter of one’s thinking. As for education, Shail also studies, this Shanno also studies, but would you ever see them doing such things?” Amma found it difficult to swallow this criticism of

educated girls!

“Well Amma, blame who you like. All I know is girls never used to behave this way before. Here, the husband was a good one but even if he were not, does that mean one should just throw him overboard and run off? She’s the limit, that woman! She was always mixing with our Rani Bibi. I told my mother-in-law long ago: ‘Look, this girl doesn’t seem to be a well-behaved one, don’t let her get too thick with Rani Bibi. After all, how long does it take for a girl to get spoilt?’”

Bhaggo Bhabhi’s *purana* showed no sign of drawing to a close and everyone’s curiosity was coming to a boil.

“Come Bhaggo, out with it now. We’ve been waiting long enough for you to show up.”

“Oh Amma, let’s forget it. I don’t go poking my nose into other people’s affairs, it’s not my habit. What business is it of mine? Arre, when she was in her house, of what use was she to us, and now that she’s run away, we won’t lose any sleep, I assure you. She was my neighbour - what with having lived next door and seeing her now and again, it just slipped of my tongue, otherwise it’s not my habit...”

“You and your habits! So what, it isn’t as if any of us is going to lose sleep either. We live in the same *mohalla*, don’t we? After all, it’s our duty to share in each others’ joys and woes. And then the good or bad name of one house brings a good or bad name to the whole *mohalla*. It’s

only nowadays, in these cursed times, that people couldn't care less about others – even about their own neighbours. There was a time when the honour of each house used to be the honour of the whole village.”

“Her mother lives right above your house, doesn't she? Why don't you go ask her why her precious darling has taken off like this?”

“Arre, why would her own mother tell me anything? *Beti paapni to bhi aapni* – however sinful, she's still her own daughter.”

“She's been crying her heart out all morning. Poor thing, how she must be feeling.” There was sympathy in Chhoti Bhabhi's tone.

“Did she run away on her own or with someone? And did she take any stuff from the house?” Badi Bhabhi tried a new tactic to set Bhaggo Bhabhi talking.

“She left the house on her own but there must be some chap or other in whose house she'll go and deposit herself. The wretch had dozens of friends visit her, believe me! She didn't take a single paisa from the house. She left with her nose in the air, all right! She even removed the ornaments from her neck and arms, and went away saying: “I can't live under anyone's tyranny, I'll earn my own living.”

“My god, she turned out to be a real courageous one!” exclaimed Chhoti Bhabhi in astonishment.

“Oh forget it. I've seen plenty of such courageous ones! She must have fixed it all up with some man beforehand – that's where she got her perkiness from! Where would a woman get such courage, without a man's support? What do you say, Shanno Bibi? You're also educated. Can you leave home and earn your living all by yourself? Can you?”

Manjhli Bhabhi spoke up. “If one has the ability, why can't one do it? Don't lots of girls earn their own living these days?” “To hell with such ability!” Bhaggo Bhabhi gestured with much energy. “if she had such ability, why would she go leaving her husband like that?”

“But what was the quarrel about? Why

did she leave?” Amma was anxious to get to the root of the matter.

“Where shall I begin? They quarreled over every single thing. The fact of the matter is that these girls who study too much, get fancy ideas and become too high and mighty. She got married when she was 25. What do you say to that? Is that any age to get married? At 25, I was a mother of four. I've heard that she used to say she wouldn't get married at all. Used to spend her time cycling all round town. Not a stitch on her head, two plaits flying – the shameless hussy used to roam around heaven knows where with all the lads of the town. If one could have such fun, which fool would go and get married? Then they say her mother cried like anything, the whole family was upset, so at last madam got married but after marriage of course, the fun they used to have before disappeared fast enough and there were nothing but quarrels every day.”

“But her husband was educated and was of her own choosing. It's only as long as you're not married and don't have all the burdens of housekeeping that you can have your fun and games. You can't expect that to continue.” Her own days of fun with Bhayya swam before Chhoti Bhabhi's eyes and she said this, but then she suddenly remembered Amma's presence and felt very sheepish.

“That's the whole trouble. I just can't understand what kind of a girl she was, the wretch. She used to write lots of letters to our Rani Bibi. You know me – I never poke my nose into anyone's business nor do I go reading people's letters, but those letters used to keep lying around and coming under my eyes. I found out everything from those letters. She had written: “I am miserable ever since I got married.” And about her own husband: ‘Apart from his office and me, he hasn't a thought in his head about anything in the world. The whole day it's the office and the whole night it's me. He doesn't like to read, to write or to meet people. And if I so much as pick up a book or a pen or meet anyone, he doesn't like it. I try my best to

stifle my desires but sometimes I just feel like leaving everything and running away.”

She lowered her voice and leaned forward – the needles and wool were motionless in everyone's hands, as if the essential mystery was about to be revealed.

“What do you think of this, Amma? After working all day, if a tired man doesn't come to the woman at home, where will he go? Arre, if you can't give the pleasure of the bed to your own husband, then has he married you to worship you or what?”

At this moment, Bhabhi's eye fell on her ten year old daughter who had quietly come in at some point during the recital and was listening to it with deep seriousness. Bhabhi gave her a sharp slap across the face. “You pest, are you going to sit on my head all the time? Can't you go out and play with the others? If you dare come and sit here among the grown ups again, I'll beat you to a pulp, understand?” The girl ran out, scared.

“Yes, now tell me – is this any reason to be unhappy or miserable? Arre, this is a great good fortune that a man comes to his own wife.” And suddenly a light, cold sign escaped her lips. “If you don't please him, *sattar jagah muh marta phirega* – he'll go wandering and have his fun in seventy other places. Then you'll complain and curse your fate.”

Matters had proceeded so far but no one looked satisfied. Hands got into motion once more. Each one had been expecting to hear some romantic narrative, some sensational history, but Bhaggo Bhabhi's preface seemed to have no end. With her gesture and expressions, she was trying her best to make it an entertaining piece but it was still unsatisfactory. If some boy's love letters had been discovered or had she been caught red-handed in a room somewhere, then beatings and blows, confusion and uproar – that would have been something like a running away story! No one was enjoying these dry moral precepts and principles. Bhaggo Bhabhi was well aware of her inability to excite

interest, she lowered her voice still further, drew everyone's attention to herself and hissed something which made all the sisters-in-law burst into giggles and provoked Amma to rebuke her: "Really Bhaggo, there's a limit! Shanno is sitting here – at least, have some consideration for an unmarried girl."

"Just because you remain unmarried, doesn't mean you don't understand these things. If you remain unmarried all your life, will you remain so innocent all your life? At Shanno Bibi's age, I was a mother of two."

Before Amma or anyone else could say a word, she picked up her story again, "Arre bhai, all I know is that a person who has drunk water at seventy *ghats* can never remain in one house. Such women should open a brothel – why destroy some poor man's house? I ask you, if she disliked all this so much, then why did she get dressed up every morning and cover her face with cream-power? Your husband goes to office – then who do you deck yourself up for? For your friends of course, who come in the daytime! Heaven knows what all she used to write and get published in the papers, and then all kinds of people would write letters to her. Her husband couldn't stand any of this but who would listen to him? Once, she was telling Rani Bibi: "I can't be a martyr to anyone's stupidly tyrannical behaviour."

Have you ever heard of such a thing? To do as your husband wishes means to become a martyr! Isn't it the limit? What I say is, if you have such high ideas, you should have been born as a man. If you are a woman, you will have to be a martyr for him not once but a hundred times. He earns, he feeds you – will his wish rule or will yours? This was a very decent man so he put up with all her nonsense. Any other man would have brought a second wife long ago. That would have taught her a lesson."

"These are all everyday affairs. There must have been some important reason for her running away, no?"

"What? So all these are unimportant things, are they? A wife doesn't care what her husband says, roams around with

others, keeps writing in magazines and carrying on correspondence with other men- how long can anyone tolerate all this? After all, there's a limit even to one's capacity for toleration. Then, they say, a month ago they had a massive quarrel. She said there was a vacancy in a school so she was going to start teaching. He flatly refused and said he wasn't going to let her trifle with his reputation by going to work. A man who is not able to earn can send his woman to work. She just declared that she was going to work (*naukari*) but a man has to consider the reputation of his family, doesn't he? They say there was a big show-down between them and after that, they stopped speaking to each other.

Now what do you say, Amma – if all



this is not plain and simple inviting trouble, what is it? A man wants to keep you like a queen (*rani*) and you say No, I'll live like a maidservant (*naukarani*- one who does service). Woman's work is to look after the house and rear children but then if your husband comes near, you get irritated as if he's going to bite you – where will such women get children from?"

There was a loud crash outside and the sound of two or three children crying. Bhabhi's story broke off and everyone's hands stopped moving. Badi Bhabhi threw down her knitting and rushed out. Amma and I looked out of the door – the kids had been climbing on to the wall and walking along it. They were imitating the girls they

had seen walking the tightrope in Gemini Circus two days earlier. As he was walking, Kunnu's foot slipped, he caught hold of Munni and down they both came. Seeing Bhabhi, the others hastily jumped down too. When Bhabhi has petted the injured ones, scolded the others and come back inside, Amma asked: "How did they fall off the wall?"

"What else would they do if not fall? The whole wall is covered with moss due to the rain."

Amma started shouting at them: "Call them children! They're a tempest in themselves – who asked them to go breaking their heads on that wall? As it is, it's such an old wall, how is it to bear the weight of scores of kids? Everyone has children but such a destructive set of kids only this house has!"

"Arre Amma, all children are destructive."

"Yes, I'd heard that they weren't on speaking terms. She'd cook the food and give it to him but they wouldn't speak to each other. Poor man, the house must have been hell for him."

"Wasn't she afraid of her husband?" asked Chachi.

"Heaven help you – she afraid! She'd be damned if she was afraid! She was a man, I tell you – an absolute man. She'd do exactly what she felt like doing, no question about it. She wasn't going to knuckle under to anybody, not she. Yesterday evening, she had to go to some meeting or other..."

Everyone sat up, every eye was fixed on Bhabhi's face.

"Her husband used to come home at five every evening. That day something must have happened, he got delayed, so of course madam couldn't wait for him, oh no. She prepared the snacks for him, kept them covered and off she went. When he came – no one at home. Poor man – in any case her being there would be as good as not being there, but still when a man comes tired, a wife should be at home, shouldn't she? Patience has its limits, you know. Yesterday, he too got fed up. When she returned at night, he caught hold of her, gave her two slaps and said: "Get out of

my house. Go and dump yourself in the house of those friends with whom you keep roaming around.”

Oh god, you should have seen her! She became a real *Chandi Mai!* But the wretch was speaking so low that one couldn't hear a word she said. But I could see that her tongue was wagging like a pair of scissors. She was going on and on! Amazing courage she has, the wretch. To tell the truth, Amma, I was all in a shiver in my own house when I heard that man shouting. When a man gets angry, I can hardly breathe for fear. Usually I never interfere in any one's quarrels, you know me, it's not my habit, but now when such a thing happens in one's neighbourhood, then we have a duty as neighbours. So I plucked up my courage and went over. I thought I'd tell her to touch her husband's feet, ask his forgiveness and promise to do as he told her in future. But my god, she started off on me too. She said: "Sister, if I am in the wrong, I'll apologize a hundred times but why should I apologize for something which I don't consider wrong? What's the use of apologizing today and doing exactly the same thing tomorrow? If we can't get along, what is the use of our living together? Today he's said it plainly – well, here ends the matter." Really Amma, I was left gaping. Do matters end like that between husbands and wives?"

Then she lowers her voice. "Arre all

this must be a put-up show. After all, what our ancestors had to say about women's character had more than some truth in it. I think she must have had it fixed up beforehand with some man. All she wanted was an excuse to leave so the minute he told her to get out of the house, she got up and left. Arre, I've been told thousands

*... We know what a boot looks like
when seen from underneath,
we know the philosophy of boots...
Soon we will invade like weeds,
everywhere but slowly;
the captive plants will rebel
with us, fences will topple,
brick walls ripple and fall,
there will be no more boots.
Meanwhile we eat dirt
and sleep; we are waiting
under your feet.*

*When we say Attack, you will
Hear nothing at first.*

— Margaret Atwood

of times to get out of the house but have I gotten out? This was nothing but a good excuse. She would have left in any case but she wanted to put all the blame on the poor man. Well Amma, the world is not blind – anyone can tell true from false!"

"Where has she gone now, does anyone know?" asked Bhabhi.

"Who knows where she's gone, the wretch..."

Another crash outside and more howling. Badi Bhabhi was annoyed: "These little devils won't let one sit in peace for two minutes." But as soon as she went out, she called: "Arre Amma, just see, the whole wall has broken down."

"The wall has broken. How?" Amma got up and went out. I followed her. We saw that a young sapling had burst through that old, moss-covered wall and somehow or other, all the stones around it had suddenly given way and tumbled down. One or two of the children sitting below had got hurt as well.

Amma began to shout loudly: "I kept saying that this sapling should be pulled out and thrown away but who listens to me in this house? Just look – the wretch is so small but she's managed to break down the whole wall!" The children's wails, Amma's shouts and Bhabhi's scolding mingled in the general uproar.

I heard Shail's voice behind me: "Hey, what on earth are you so busy thinking about? You're not even aware that I've been standing here for two whole minutes, calling out to you!" I was startled: "Nothing, I wasn't thinking of anything at all." And truly I wasn't thinking of anything. I was only looking at that tiny sapling which had brought such a huge wall crashing down and created such a furore in the house. □

— translated from Hindi by Manushi

Rape in Marriage

My name is Diana Russell and I am working on a book about rape in marriage. I want very much to be able to include in the book information and experiences of this problem from women all over the world. I am particularly interested to hear from women who have themselves been raped by their husband.

I would also like to learn how widespread this problem is in countries other than the United States i.e. what percentage of married women do you think have been raped by their husbands? Is rape in marriage permitted by law in your country? What about when a woman is raped by her ex-husband or by a husband from whom she is separated – is this against the law? Aside from the law, how do other people react to a woman who has been raped by her husband? For example, do they tend to blame her?

We must remember that most of our problems are not limited to one country, but affect women everywhere. Please help to make this book a total of change for all of us.

Sisterhood is powerful! International sisterhood is more powerful!

The deadline for completing *Rape in Marriage* is June 1, 1981. So please mail your contribution to me *as soon as possible*: Diana Russell, Sociology Department, Mills College, Oakland, California 94613, USA.