



MONA... One of Many

I WAS a pretty, well-educated, tall, fair girl. My father searched very hard for a proper match for me. But there was one obstacle— my father had no dowry to give, and he said so frankly in all the newspaper advertisements. My brother also put in a lot of advertisements which did not say anything about dowry. Soon I found myself engaged to an army officer.

When the wedding details were being fixed up, my father-in-law told my father that they would bring 100 people in the *baraat* and that they wanted many woollen suits for their relatives. My father told them that 50 was the limit for the *baraat*. Then we realized that these people had written in response to my brother's advertisement and they did not know that we could not give dowry. My fiancée and I exchanged a couple of letters. Three months before the wedding, he came home on leave. He never visited me though I waited for him.

Well, we got married. My father gave a nice wedding, fine clothes, household linen, electric gadgets and so on. He had no money for gold so he gave only a wedding ring for my husband. When I reached my in-laws' place, there was very little reception for me. My husband never talked to me in the bus while we were going home. At night I kept waiting for him. He came very late. I touched his feet,

he removed them. He was quite considerate after that. Next day there was a party. He had gone out at lunch time, his relatives forced me to eat and we had lunch together. When he came back, he was angry that I had eaten without him, so he very rudely told me to go to my room. I was stunned.

From then on, a chain of events started which I found strange. We went to Srinagar for our honeymoon. He took his elder brother, sister-in-law, uncle and aunt along. We were all cramped into one holiday hut. My husband hardly talked to me. Every morning we would head towards the market for shopping. I noticed his funny attitude but gave no sign of it and was quite happy. I talked and laughed with his relatives.

When we returned from Srinagar, he noticed that his unloving attitude did not make me sad. I did not cry or remain in my room, ashamed of myself because I had not brought enough dowry. He found that on the contrary I was enjoying myself thoroughly and had developed good relations with his parents. I was 25 when I married and had been teaching in a school and a college, so I was self confident enough to remain composed.

I remember it was winter and I would snuggle close to him at night. The moment I would go to his bed, he would turn his back to me and go to sleep.

After two months, he went on a course and took both me and his mother along. We slept in one room and she in the other. During the day we were never alone and at night were scared to make any sound. I am an excellent cook. I would try out new dishes every day, Mummyji never liked that I was creating an impression on my husband. After that,

she would always shoo me out of the kitchen and work herself. When my husband returned, he would find her working and would be more angry. I told him that she did not let me enter the kitchen. He said that was not possible.

Whenever we sat together, Mummyji would say: "So and so gave so much to his daughter at her wedding, that boy got a car when he married, that one had a diamond set." The three of us would always go out together. I would trudge along with them, not knowing what to talk to them since their main topic of conversation was dowry and their relatives. I had a terrible time. I became nearly a mental wreck. It was hard to imagine that I who was an M.Sc., and had been a teacher was being treated as badly as are uneducated girls.

I never wanted a child so soon after marriage. Initially my husband had also agreed with me but now he suddenly said that he wanted to see me pregnant— as if he was taking revenge on me. He refused to use any contraceptive. I felt desperate. There was a family planning clinic on the road by which we used to go to the market. Daily, I would look at it and want to go there. But Mummyji was always there and I was shy to go alone. Well, I got pregnant.

Pregnancy had an adverse effect on me. My face got covered with pimples. I was not happy and started looking wretched. Before the first wedding anniversary, I had a daughter. Now I was supposed to visit my parents and bring a lot of gifts. Well, I went to them. They were happy but I was worried as to whether they would give me all the gifts. Otherwise, I knew, my husband would be more angry. I had saved Rs 300 from

* *Mona is her pen name and this sketch is based on her photograph*

the household expenditure money. I bought a lot of crockery and cutlery with this money. My parents gave me a silk sari, 11 frocks for the baby and two knitted sets. Each one of my three brothers and my sister also sent very expensive frocks for the baby.

When I came back after a month's stay with my parents my husband would not talk to me. At night, he just lay on his side, and did not even ask how I was. I was very angry and asked: "What is wrong with you? Has your mother taught you something against me?" At this he flared up. He went and told my mother-in-law what I had said. Mother-in-law got very angry and started abusing me. I had suffered a lot and could not take any more. I answered back. This was after a year's silence. I told them what I thought of them. Then my husband picked up the child's walker which I had brought and hit me with it. I was astounded — I had never thought he would hit me. At this time, I was on the verge of committing suicide.

My father-in-law was the only one who asked me what was wrong. I told him that since marriage, we had never stayed alone. Mother-in-law was always there and always droning about what others have given to their daughters as dowry. She used to insist that no army officer can make anything on his own unless his in-laws help him. I used to think that this is not true— my father and brothers are in the army and they live well. So why could not we do the same?

After that, for one year my mother-in-law stayed away from me. We slowly started buying things for the house. I would really save, curb my desire to buy saris or things to eat, just so that I could buy things for the house. Many times, when we went to the market in the evening, I would see those delicious gulabjamuns and would want them. Then I would think: "It will cost Re 1." So I would keep quiet. Many times I would go without eggs so as to save money. My mother-in-law had left a permanent impression on my mind that since I had not brought a dowry I could not have a good house. I wanted to remove that misunderstanding. Within

three years we had a well-decorated house. People who came would admire our things.

I again became pregnant. The doctor told me that it was not wise to have an abortion. But I thought that if we had another child, expenses would go up and we would not be able to buy a white metal tea set, stereo and other things. So I had an abortion. It nearly cost me my life. Now I realize that it was a foolish decision because we were not able to save money in any case. My husband insisted on going on leave every three months and all the money saved was wasted on that.

My husband always tried to insult my parents. Once when he got hurt in an accident, and my father came to see him, he told my father to get out of the house. My father was furious and told me to go along with him. I was already fed up and I agreed. Ultimately my father-in-law persuaded me not to go. My husband would often say to me: "Why don't you go and embrace your father? He writes you letters twice a week." Or he would accuse me of flirting with the batman. All this to make me unhappy. I would bear all this and still smile whenever I met anyone. Every six months or so, he would hit me. Oh, I hated him and used to curse him in my heart. I wished that he would die. I used to observe Karva Chauth (fast for husband's long life) but I stopped keeping it as I did not think my husband's life was worth one day of missing my meals.

Manushi, I cannot tell you what I have suffered, thought and accepted in silence. I would look at my hands and wonder whether it was really I who used to be a teacher and earn money. Now even if I wanted a blouse I had to wait three or four months for it.

During my second pregnancy, my mother-in-law came to us. Every evening, she and my husband would go out and leave me alone. When my pains started they were out shopping and returned very late. I was angry and told them that shopping was not all that important. At that my husband blew up. He cursed me in front of the servant and the batman. He could not hit me in front of his mother otherwise he wanted to do that. He did

not want to take me to the hospital. I cried during my labour pains—not because of pain but because of sorrow. How a woman who is about to bring new life into the world is tortured. It is the supreme gift which a woman gives and the world takes it so lightly.

I had a son. I was so happy because if it had been a girl it would have been a miserable life for me. When my husband came to see me after the delivery he saw that I was having a boiled egg and he said: "Oh you are having eggs!" I was so angry at his meanness. While I was in the hospital, my husband and mother-



Purnima

in-law would come to see me for only half an hour, would hardly talk and then go to see a film. I hated them from the bottom of my heart and I also stopped talking to them. On the 13th day my mother-in-law gave *shagan* to the child and said that I was fit to enter the kitchen. The next day, my husband's elder brother came with his wife to see the child. They stayed two days, during which they went shopping, sight-seeing and saw a film. My husband and mother-in-law accompanied them while I was supposed to cook the food. On one side was the crying child, I wanted to rest, but the food had to be cooked. I vowed to take revenge on all of them.

When they left, I told my husband that he had no business to roam around while I was in hospital. He abused and beat me up. He wrote to my father asking

him to take me back. My father wrote asking both of us not to be rash and to think the matter over again.

My husband's anger cooled off, but this delivery, its aftermath and the fight left a permanent scar on my mind which will never go off. I felt most unsettled. I was married to a man who could turn me out of the house any time. I stopped bothering about him. If he looked after his clothes, jolly good—otherwise, I wouldn't do it. I stopped responding to him sexually. Most of the time, I would make one excuse or another. Even if he did insist, I would want it to be over as soon as possible. For me sex was and still is a bitter pill which has to be swallowed. I sometimes feel surprised how I who used to be so romantic and now I have become almost frigid.

Well, now life is going on. My daughter is five and son two years old. I have taken up a teaching job. There is no communication between me and my husband. Fights have decreased because now I bring home Rs 625 per month. I

don't love him or respect him. For me life is to be compulsorily lived because of my children. Everybody thinks we are very happy, have good children and good jobs. I am supposed to be a lucky woman as my husband does not drink much, does not womanize and is not a spendthrift. The only thing we both share is love for our children and the same house. I sometimes feel so strange as I cannot talk to him about what I feel. Life will go on. We will also save for our children, do all the things which other people do but who knows that behind this smart, active, working woman is a heart which was once full of life but now has been robbed of life so that what is left is only a machine working and doing all the normal things?

This is not only my story. It is the story of each and every woman because with a little variation, every woman suffers. Men eat their cake and have it too. They get preferential treatment as boys, sons, brothers, and later as husbands. But a girl is cursed when she

is born, parents hate having to save for her wedding. After marriage, she is taunted, made to work like a donkey, harassed, beaten, and often thrown out of the house. Still, she is supposed to forgive them all and observe fasts for her husband's life. My bloody foot! It is time we changed our attitude and that of those around us. How long are we going to be tortured? We should get united. In every house, there is a wife, mother, sister. If we are united, we can change our homes, this society.

When I wrote to you in an earlier letter that on reading Manushi, one feels it is a woman's fate to cry inside and laugh outside, I meant that this is true for every woman with no exception. When we meet together, we meet only as smart, happy women clad in nice saris. Nobody tells another of her problems. And if anyone does so, she is looked down upon, pitied. It is only when the same women write to Manushi about their true selves that one knows what they really feel. □

She Said...

She said she was unhappy and they said they would take care of her. She said she needed love and so they raped her and then she wanted to be alone. They locked her into a tiny cell with one tiny window and took away her clothes, turning off all the lights as they left. After a long while they came back and she said "Its so dark" so they shined a very bright light into her face and she said "I don't like that" "What's the matter" they said and she said "There is nothing to eat, couldn't you please give me some water" so they brought a hose and sprayed her hard with water. "Are you happy now" they said and she answered "Please, I'm so very cold, my bones ache and I shiver all the time." So they brought huge piles of sticks and newspaper and built a very large fire in her cell. She squeezed her body out of the window and fell a great distance and was killed. "The trouble with people like her" they said later " is that no matter how hard you try to please them, they are never satisfied."

Judy Grahn

Send Us Postage

As you know, Manushi is always short of funds. We get hundreds of letters and reply to each one personally. The costs of mailing are becoming too heavy for Manushi. Could all those who write to us, please enclose a self-addressed, stamped envelope for reply?

Also, many of you write to us asking for a sample copy to be sent. We cannot afford to send free copies, unless to women who absolutely cannot afford to pay, or to people in prisons. Please send us Rs 4.35 for a sample copy in India, Bangladesh, Nepal, (or Rs 2.35 at a subsidized rate for those who cannot afford full cost) \$4 for the US, \$3.50 for England, Japan, Australia, \$3 for Africa, \$1.50 for Asian countries.

Recording Women's Experience

In a country like ours, where the majority of women are not able to write, it is of critical importance that we find other means to preserve what they have to say to their sisters. And to ensure that

those of us who can write do not end up putting our words in their mouths, we now try to use a tape recorder as much as possible, whether for group discussions as in the health column or to record the impressions of women about a particular protest demonstration or when we visit women in other regions or when women speak about their lives (One of Many). We hope to continue to build this very important record of women speaking and we hope you will all help us build it.

If you write or report any event or experience for **Manushi**, you could try using this medium as well. We have found that the idea of it causes much more nervousness than the actuality does. When we ask if we may tape the conversation, women think it might make them nervous but once it's switched on, everyone forgets its presence.

Please send us as many empty or used tapes as you possibly can. It will be a very useful and valued contribution to **Manushi** work and to the process of sharing women's experience across time and space.