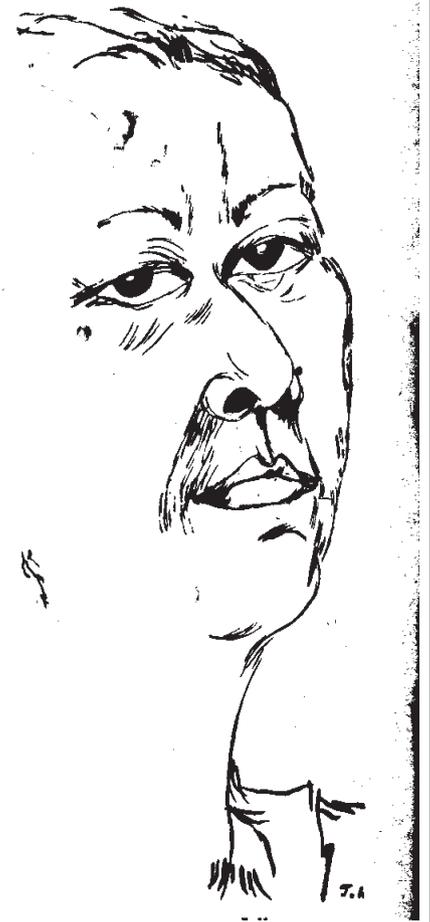


PUSHPA... One of Many*

WE first came to know Pushpaji about a year ago when she walked into **Manushi** office and offered to help in any way she could. In her own words : “I was at the bookstall trying to find some intelligent paper or magazine, I saw **Manushi** and bought it. I saw it written : ‘Whoever is willing to help, come over’, I came over.”

After this she kept in touch, helping with translation and documentation work whenever she could find time, participating in discussions and group activities, and keeping us all cheerful with her flow of conversation. She seemed to have a very full schedule—managing the house, doing social work, and writing. Her first book—on the life conditions, problems and achievements of the blind, based on extensive interviews with blind people—is now awaiting publication.

From what she told us of her life, it seemed that she used to write when she was young but had given it up during 25 years of married life, and renewed it only after the death of her husband a few years ago. We were amazed at this—how could one suppress a whole aspect of one’s mind and aspirations for the best part of one’s life and then revive it with such abounding vitality? One Sunday, a group of us were having a discussion on our lives and personal struggles as women, and we asked Pushpaji how and why she had given up writing. She then told us the story of her life, which we tape-recorded. We reproduce below extracts from the conversation. Some parts have been translated from Hindi.



—Jolly Rohtagi

MY marriage was arranged when I was about 23 years old. I didn’t want to get married. I wanted to study further. But my parents were very keen and also they were not well-off—they had lost a lot during the Partition, So I finally agreed. He was an army officer so my family thought he was a good match. I had started writing in 1952. Some of my plays and stories were broadcast over the radio. But after marriage in 1955, I stopped writing.

How did he stop you writing ?

He used to make fun of it, he didn’t like it. He would create a very tense atmosphere in the house so that I shouldn’t be able to concentrate on anything. Every morning he used to give me specific work for the day so that I would not get time to read. And there was a lot of work to be done. I had to have my house nicely decorated because when you are living with a senior officer, everyone comes to your house and it

has to be properly done up for the senior officer’s respect. When the senior officer has so many servants, you have to look after the servants also. But I never stopped reading, I used to finish all the work quickly, and find some time to continue reading, to save the writer in me from completely dying away. I used to borrow books from the local library.

In 1967 when he was on the Tibet border and I was alone in Bareilly, I wrote one piece which was published in Sarika. I had written something like “There is a kind of lava boiling inside me.” When he read it, he said : “Are you going to tell affairs of the family to outsiders?” So after that I didn’t write again.

What about the years when he was in the field?

He used to write me a letter a day and I was supposed to reply every day. Once when I didn’t write for a week, because I had gone to attend a cousin’s marriage, I found three letters, an express letter

and a telegram waiting for me. When I wrote and told him there was nothing to worry about, he said : “You have to write me a letter a day. I must know where you are and what you are doing everyday.” I never hid anything from him. He used to get annoyed about many things I did but I let him be annoyed rather than not tell him.

What were the things which annoyed him?

Like supposing I called over a few ladies for tea and we had a happy time. If he came to know, he wouldn’t like the idea of my being happy with a feminine group when he was not there. He would immediately ask: “You must have served them something?” I would say: “Yes, I did,” His reply would be : “Fine, open a hotel for them,” I was never allowed to visit other ladies. He’d say ; “There’s no need to go to anyone’s house,” But other ladies used to come to visit me. I would keep on cooking, looking after the

children, and keep on talking. He never liked this.

Did you have close personal friends?

With the greatest difficulty I maintained friendship with two girls who are my childhood friends.

Why was it difficult ?

Because he would refuse to visit them, refuse to invite them over. But my friends were real friends. Though I didn't tell them in so many words, they knew he was a difficult person and they carried on. We are still friends.

How was he, regarding money ?

He used to give me all the money. It was kept in my custody. Wherever we went, money would be in my purse. In the bank too, all the money was in joint account. But I was not allowed to spend the money. You see, I never considered his money to be my money. I never spent it on myself. It was only he who spent money.

You never had any independent control over income ?

No.

If you had tried spending on your own, what would have happened ? Did you ever do it ?

No, I never did it. He used to buy everything for me. He used to buy lavishly—saris, shawls, coat, shoes. It gave me the feeling that he wanted me to have good things because I was his wife. To display his wife nicely dressed, decked up. I never liked cosmetics. He was very fond of cosmetics and perfumes. I used to be drenched in them while he was alive. After his death, I stopped using any such thing.

You didn't like it ?

No, I don't like to be dolled up. Why should you? To please men? They never do anything to please you. I used to feel ashamed of putting so many things on my face. But I had to.

If you had money which was your own, what are the things you would like to spend it on?

I was in such a depressed mood...
Like now ?

Now I would like to spend on books. No jewellery, no saris, nothing. But at that time I was in such a depressed mood that I didn't feel like buying anything. I

didn't feel like eating anything. I ate what he wanted me to eat, I dressed in whatever he wanted me to dress in. Yes, I was a very obedient wife. I was not treated as a human being. I was treated as a wife. I had to look after senior officers, generals, upto the level of the vice president. I was moving in very high society and I was liked by everybody. They all thought I had the upper hand in the house but I know that I was just doing whatever he wanted me to do. In those 25 years I didn't do anything that I wanted to do for myself.

But how did this myth come to be— people seeing you as the ideal couple ?

Because I never opened my mouth against him. I never told anyone that I was miserable. You know when you are fed up, utterly fed up, you do attain a sort of smiling posture. So I was in a smiling posture for 25 years .

Did you never tell your family, your mother ?

No, never.

Till today they believe you were happy ?

Yes. I always told them ; "I'm very happy, please don't worry about me."

What about your children ?

My younger son sensed when he grew up. He used to tell his father: "If she is not saying anything, why are you going on and on ? Why can't you leave her alone?" Twice or thrice he fought with his father. But I never replied to my husband, I never stood to fight with him. Because the person cannot insult you in words more than he has already done. If you speak, he can beat you, abuse you.

He never beat you ?

No, he never beat me. He would get irritated and say : "Here I am gassing away since an hour and you are absolutely unaffected!" I would answer: "I am. watching you and am astonished by you!"

But how did it feel to be scolded in front of the children ?

I didn't allow that. I used to run away. We always had big houses because he was in the army. If he was shouting in the drawing room, I would go to the bedroom; if he was shouting in the bedroom, I would go to the kitchen, I

never gave him a chance to shout at me directly, and I never listened to what he was shouting. Because when you don't want to reply, why listen? Once you listen properly, you will get worked up and only then you'll reply.

This is really passive resistance !

I would have lost respect in my own eyes, and I respected myself more than anyone else. So just to save myself from damage, I used to run away, I used to get terrible headaches. When you cannot talk to anyone, it has to come out in some way. Then I would take some sleeping pills and go to sleep.

In the beginning I used to cry when he shouted at me. But then I realized that this is very silly— how long can you keep on crying ? So I just tried to make it a habit. I thought I am going to live with this man throughout my life so...

Would you say you ever loved him?

No, I didn't love him but I was a very loyal wife, a very devoted wife to him.

Did you never think of coming out of this marriage ?

It was not possible without hurting so many people - hurting my children, hurting my parents and hurting reputation. And I was not sure of anybody's support.

You could not support yourself?

I could not. As a writer? Writers are not paid enough to live on. My education was very haphazard, I was not put in a proper college, I studied on my own. My father said ; "There is no need to study—you study Hindi, that's all." But I went on studying English as well and I passed exams privately. I did the Hindi exams like *Bhushan*, *Prabhakar* and *Sahitya Ratan* and simultaneously I did matriculation and intermediate and BA. I used to write, and pay my fees with the money I earned. People at home were not bothered what I was studying. They said : "What is the use of your studying? It's fine if boys study but why should you study?" I asked my principal for help. He told me to write for an economic journal edited by him. He used to publish the articles under his own name. I was just a kid, I didn't know what he was doing, I was happy to have Rs 15 per article to pay my fees, even though I had to stay awake nights to write one

article. So I was not trained to get any job and support myself.

Did you ever feel like having a relationship with any other man ?

No I am the romantic type all right, but I have got a sort of aversion to physical relationship, I had a physical relationship only with my husband but it was not a pleasant experience. I would never like to have such a relationship with any man, I never wanted to and I never want to.

Do you mean you just had to put up with it even though you didn't want it?

Yes I had to. Any woman has to if she doesn't want a scene in the house.

You mean he would have made a scene if you had refused ?

Well, if you do not like it, you have to say something to get out of it. And if you say something, he says another thing, then it leads to a fight. It can lead to beating, abusing, anything.

So it never happened that you said No?

No. I never said No.

How does 25 years like that feel when you look back at it ?

Well, even during the period when we were together, I used to keep on feeling bad about this but I could not voice it. Even when I was feeling worst I had to tell him that I was feeling very happy and contented.

Psychologically what does this do to you ?

Psychologically you go through hell. You feel like saying something, you feel like crying, you feel like telling somebody. But you just cannot tell anybody without degrading yourself, without telling others that you are nobody, you are not treated as a human being. And you can't tell this to anybody.

How did you survive it all those years ?

I kept aloof. Whatever was happening, it was not happening to my mind, it was happening to my body. I gave my body, not my mind. I thought that the body is not mine but the mind is mine, I am an intellectual being, not a physical being.

But you are also a physical being ?

You have to get out of it, to save yourself. To save your mental faculties,

you have to separate your, body and mind. That is how I survived. My self-preservation was just to keep dumb. Many times he told me : "You are just like a dead log" He also wanted me to drink with him. He wouldn't like me to drink in public but he thought may be after drinking at home with him, I would be more agreeable to everything. Once he forced me to drink half a bottle of rum. But I was still in my senses, I didn't agree to what he wanted me to do, I didn't give him the pleasure of having a drinking wife. Because I don't like drink, I don't like the taste,

Did you want to have a child when you did ?

No, I did not, I told my husband that I had never wanted children, I didn't know how to bring up children. He wanted to have more than two but I said No, nothing doing, I sent the two boys to a boarding school. I have seen mothers sitting and teaching their sons. I never sat even for one day to teach them.

What was the experience of having a child?

I think delivery is quite easy, I can do that many times! But bringing up is difficult.

Did you use contraceptives ?

Sometimes men are not in a mood to use contraceptives. So what do you do then ? But he agreed when I said that two children were enough.

You didn't think of sterilization ?

No, he didn't agree to it.

You didn't have a daughter ?

No. Luckily. I know that daughters are treated as slaves and I never wanted to produce a slave.

You could have brought her up differently ?

If I had no right to make my own life better, how could I have done anything for my daughter ? She would have been brought up in the same manner. Today, if I have been able to retain my spirit, it is because I have no worries about my family. If I had a daughter I would have died of worry—how she would be treated, whether she would be happy...

How did his death come to you?

You know it was very funny. He was lying there dead in the hospital, I was

there and my son was there. The first thing that came to my mind was: "Now I will start writing again," Then I thought: "No, he can't be dead. He should be alive," I kept on feeling his pulse—there was no pulse. I really didn't feel anything for quite some time. Then I told my son : "Ring them up at home and tell them he has died." I was not as depressed as I was when he was alive. Anybody's death brings a certain quality of depression—it didn't bring that sort of depression in me.

How did your relatives react ?

My mother is still miserable and keeps on crying for me. My father has not been keeping well since then.

How did the relatives expect you to behave?

They expected me to sit and do all the howling but I didn't do it. They wanted me to change into white but I didn't. I only stopped wearing make-up because I didn't like it. So they said: "She is a very brave woman" !

I didn't ask any of the relatives to stay and help me. I did the whole business of finishing the construction of the house, getting the children settled and setting myself into my writing.

What are the other things you do now, besides writing ?

I go to the blind school to read to the blind boys. I am a member of Delhi Commonwealth Women's Association, We get together and do stitching for the poor. I am the cutter, I don't like stitching. Once a week we go to a village where we have a dispensary. We dispense medicines there.

What do you write about ?

I write about social problems. And I write—to please myself. For example, I wrote one play about child marriage. My dhobi's daughter who is hardly ten years old, came crying to me one day, saying ; "They are getting me married. I don't want to get married, I want to study." I talked to her parents but they said they were being harassed —people used to taunt them and try to molest her. So I wrote a play and it was broadcast several times on the radio.

How do you feel being a widow?

I don't use any of the faculties which exist for widows, I refuse to take them.

Being a widow is not a specification. They say "widow" in such a pathetic manner as if it is something very deplorable. I don't like it.

All these years I was not called by my own name. I was just "Mrs K...." Now I tell everyone to call me "Pushpa."

What do you think of Sati ?

Dying for a stupid cause ! Committing suicide for nothing!

Do you think your sons have learnt a lesson? Are they better than their father ?

Sons are always trying to copy their father. They have a bit of their mother too but most of the things they do exactly as their father did.

You couldn't bring them up as you wanted to ?

No. I realized that there are certain things which they inherit from their fathers and you can't destroy that whatever you do.

You couldn't influence their attitudes ?

You cannot. You just cannot. Because in our society the man from the beginning is told that he is a man and can do whatever he wants. You cannot break their habit of demanding. The mother is a woman. If you tell them their father is not to be followed they will hate you because they love their father.

Can they love such a man ?

They do. Because they are exactly the same. Both my sons act as if they are my fathers. They keep asking me why I am going out, why I am doing this or that. I ask them: "Are you my sons or my fathers?" I remember when my elder son was six years old, once we were at the railway station and I wanted to go to the toilet. My husband said: "Vijay, you go with your mama," Vijay came with me and said: "You wait here, I will go ahead and have a look— there may be someone hiding inside the toilet." A six year old boy think he is a man and I am a woman so it is his duty to protect me from whoever may be hiding there ! What can you do about it ? They are taught from the very beginning that they are men and you are women. You may be 50 years old you may be his mother or grand-mother but you are still a woman and he is a man—he thinks he can look after you.

How do they react to your free movements now?

Once there was a theft in our tenants' house. My younger son said to me: "Why do you go to the German school? Why are you learning German at this age? If you had been at home, these people would have been saved." I said: "How do you know? If I had been at home most probably I would have been killed. I am not a chowkidar to look after your things. You go and get your things insured. I am not going to keep sitting here to look after your things,"

Why do you say "your things" and not "my things"?

Because I told you I never felt what my husband bought was mine. He always made it a point that it was his house, his sons, I was his wife. So everything was his. I had nothing in that house. I was just there, waiting...

But he was a nice man in one way. He left the house and money to me. In his own way he had a sort of love or regard for me. But it was quite suffocating. He was so extremely possessive. He was very kind—buying things for me, taking me out, looking after me, leaving money to me. But does that really mean anything to me as a person? When your personality is crushed. What do all these things mean? If on a heap of fat you put so much money and good clothes and good food and say good words like: "She is a very devoted wife, a very good wife", it doesn't touch you personally anywhere. He was so possessive—he couldn't stand it if I even talked to another man but he loved to talk to every other woman in the station. I never minded it. I was not jealous because I was not in love with him. I didn't like the way he treated me.

Did you want to talk to any other man ?

No. I got the feeling that every man is like that. If every man is the same, then why leave one and go after another ? Why not live on your own? Why not try to protect yourself, whatever you are?

That's why I told my son's fiancée: "He is a man. He is going to maltreat you. Be careful." I know this is true even though I love my son.

What do you think of the whole

business of a man and a woman living together ?

It makes you a very, very dull person. You are actually a dead body moving about, having a mask on your face all the time.

But after 25 years you are back in full force!

It is back in full force because it was there all the time waiting to come out. It was not allowed to come out, I also wonder at times how I managed to control it so long and then let it go out, all out, in a very planned manner.

How do you think you have developed such a good analysis and understanding of the position of woman within marriage, the family and in society?

Because I had been thinking about it. I was not allowed to talk to anybody about it so I was thinking throughout my life, every day of my life, I was just thinking: "If this happens, I'll do this..." You know, unintentionally, you are just... Hoping ...feeling...that if this thing happens—though there were no chances of my husband's leaving me just like this. He was much more healthy than I was. Suddenly he developed this trouble, due to drink...

What do you think of marriage ?

Well, I can't tell anybody not to get married but if I was to live my life again, I would never get married.

What would you tell us?

Well I would tell you not to get married but unless you feel very strongly about it, you are not going to listen to me !

What do you think of a man and woman living together without getting married ?

I don't like it. Because the same person who is living with you without getting married, will go and tell his friends: "Oh, she is a prostitute."

Will all men do this ?

All men do this. All men will do this, I have been watching since last 50 years!

Don't you think there can be exceptions?

99 per cent are like this. There may be one odd fish. So, because they don't give women due respect. I wouldn't

advise a woman to go and live with a man. Even if you want to live, have a contract on paper because—you want to live with him, you think you can love him for two years, but within two years the love is going to evaporate and you are going to come back to mother earth. So make a contract for two years.

Did you suggest this to your prospective daughter-in-law ?

No, I suggested it to my son. I am more on her side because if he says anything to her, she starts crying, and I think she will be crying throughout her life. I told my son: "If you make her cry, I will see to you !"

Does he also talk insultingly about her?

No, he doesn't. He has made her his property. He has started ordering her around already.

Don't you get angry and speak up ?

No, they'll think I am trying to ruin their love ! But I am very friendly with the girlfriends of both my sons. They

come and talk to me, sit with me. They are more friendly with me than with my sons! Because I am very frank with them.

But I am very clear in my mind that while living with a man you should have the right to leave after two years, but it should be a marriage so that he cannot call you names behind your back. And if it is a contract for two years, he will also be scared that you can leave him. They are on their best behaviour when they know that "*chhod ke chali jayegi.*" They come out with their true colours only when they know she cannot go anywhere !

Have you ever talked about your married life like this before ?

No, never. No one ever asked about it.

Outside of here, you have never talked about it ?

Why should I? When he's not here to defend himself, why should I go and tell people that he was bad to me ? He has left so much money for me. People will say : "This woman has gone mad." I

am telling you because you are asking me the facts of my life. So I am telling you the facts for the benefit of others.

How does it feel to talk about it to us?

Well, it makes me think very clearly about my past. But I don't want to keep thinking about it. I want to forget it. When there are so many new things to think about, why keep thinking about the past which was not happy ?

What prompted you to talk to us even though we have not known each other very long ?

Because you are working for the cause of women. Women who are miserable. You want to better the miserable position of women. That's what prompted me to talk about my life. Very clearly. So that you know the problem of so-called very nicely, very highly settled women in our society. □

A VICTORY FOR THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

The high court has admitted a petition for revision of the judgment by the district sessions court, Raichur, acquitting the accused in the Rameezabee rape case. The petition was filed by three women's organizations—Indian Federation of Women Lawyers, Vimochana and Stree Shakti Sanghatana, with the support of several women's groups all over the country.

In March 1978, Rameezabee was allegedly raped and her husband murdered by policemen in the Nallakunta police station, Hyderabad. This led to a widespread agitation and the setting up of the Mukhtadar commission by government. The commission conducted an enquiry and held the accused guilty. But when the case was filed against them, they appealed for transfer of the case to Karnataka. There, they were acquitted of the charges of rape and murder.

This case is of great significance because Rameezabee's sexual history and the absence of injuries on her body were used against her to negate the charge of rape. That judgment in rape cases can be based on such "evidence" exposes the inadequacy of the rape law and of the proposed bill to amend it (see Manushi No. 7).

Your solidarity and support are needed for the campaign.

—Vimochana, Bangalore

"TOKEN RESERVATION"—FOR HALF THE POPULATION!

The Pallavan Transport Corporation in Madras, reserves the entire left row, that is half the total number of seats, in its buses for women passengers. Recently, K.P. Janardhan Rao, a resident of Alwarpet, has filed a writ petition in the Madras high court, challenging this reservation. He claims that it is "unreasonable" and interferes with his "right to travel in comfort." The managing director of PTC had turned down his representation. He considers this unfair, since he pays the same fares as women, do ! He points out in the petition that neither in neighbouring states nor in Delhi is there such "indiscriminate reservation." There is only some token reservation. So he wants this "discrimination" to be removed, and only a few seats to be reserved for women passengers in the front or back row. It is interesting that no petitions are filed against the manifest discrimination against women in so many other spheres (for example when we are refused employment in certain forestry departments or by many engineering companies) but any attempt to give women their legitimate claim to half of available facilities is challenged as unfair ! We hope to hear from women readers in, Madras the future progress of this case.