

SHORT STORY
ASHAPOORNA DEVI



A Double Storeyed House

THE small double storeyed house had recently been painted so it looked new. Seen from a distance, it was pretty as a picture, with its pink walls, deep green doors and windows, and parapets arched in the Raniganj style. It was difficult to imagine how it must have looked when first built, just as when one sees a grown up man dressed in modern style, one cannot imagine how he looked as an infant in his mother's arms.

When the house was built, it was single storeyed. There had not been enough money for the roof, so they had made do with corrugated tin sheets. The two brothers Manotosh and Mahitosh who, with their families, had come from their village to Calcutta, had managed to buy this small plot of land in a suburb, and constructed two rooms, roofed with corrugated tin. What if the roof was of tin? Was it not enough that they were living in the city? And not just any city but Calcutta itself, where water flowed when one turned on the tap! In those days the practice of making light flow by pressing a switch had not caught on. That heavenly thing called "electric lighting" was reserved only for the wealthy. So what? Was not a kerosene lamp as great a luxury? Was not this house a palace compared to the thatched hut in the village? The

brothers were happy and their wives thankful.

Their home was like heaven to them. They never tired of gazing at the walls, and they trod as if wary of soiling the floor with their feet. If only two more rooms could be built in the remaining space at the back, their cup would indeed be full to the brim.

Manotosh's wife Padma was older, but she was childless. The younger wife Champa had a son and a daughter. Padma did not suffer for her childlessness, however. Outsiders could not even make out which woman was the mother of the two children. In fact, the children themselves found it difficult to distinguish, since they were petted much more by their big mother. The two brothers were inseparable, and the sisters-in-law fast friends. Their housekeeping was indeed a sight to warm the heart.

Outside the bedrooms, a thatched enclosure had been put up to serve as a kitchen. The sisters-in-law spent most of their time in this enclosure, but their hearts overflowed with pride when they looked at the two rooms of brick and cement. Those rooms were filled with bits of furniture, and decorations that were more like children's toys. The two brothers were traders so they spent much time in the market, and things began to accumulate in the house.

Manotosh would bring two cheap mirrors, and would tell Padma: "Here, now you can look at yourself as long as you please, and hang this other one in the other room." Or Mahitosh would bring two pairs of clay birds, and would first take one pair to Padma's room, saying: "Bhabhi, tell me on which wall these will look good." Manotosh would buy small frocks, pinafores, coats and pants, while Mahitosh would buy two saris, two combs or two cakes of toilet soap.

Mahitosh brought a wrapper and said: "Brother, wear this, and do get rid of that jacket. It's not fit to be seen." Manotosh tried to return the wrapper, saying crossly: "You have to do so much running around, so you need a warm coat. I've been telling you for a long time but instead, you've gone and wasted money on this. I was getting along all right."

Alas! Why could they not have got along thus for ever?



This happy housekeeping was disturbed when the house was to be repaired for the first time. They had saved up some money, so Manotosh said: "Now we can build the two rooms." "No, no", said Mahitosh, "First the roof must be built."

Manotosh's point was that the house was full of stuff so the two rooms

were urgently needed. But Mahitosh too had a point — why build more rooms when one does not even have a proper roof over one's head ?

Mahitosh prevailed because the older sister-in-law was on his side, and of course so was his own wife, Champa, although she did not express an opinion. Both the sisters-in-law longed to sit on the rooftop and dry their hair, to prepare pickles and spices there, to lean on the parapet as did all the other women, and watch the world go by. They had realised that without a roof, life was incomplete. They had also realised that this was the deficiency which made them unequal to the other women of the neighbourhood. They had not been able to strike up a friendship with a single woman. Being village women, they sorely missed such friendship. But how could a friendship develop? Does everyone who lives in the neighbourhood become one's neighbour ? If so, then even the grass should be considered the neighbour of the pipal tree.

So the savings were spent on the construction of a roof and a staircase. Everyone was happy except Manotosh. He did not once climb the stairs. Climbing stairs made him feel out of breath. On every possible occasion, he showed his dissatisfaction with the lack of more rooms.

The rift widened when the mason was called in a second time. Mahitosh wanted to build a second storey to the house. He said that would solve the problem of extra rooms without wasting space. He decided to build a brick kitchen, store and bathroom downstairs, and to roof them with the old corrugated tin sheets. When they were younger, the women had not felt the need for a kitchen or a bathroom. They had managed in the open, under the tap. Now the discomfort had begun to seem overwhelming. They decided to throw all the unwanted stuff—the broken tins and bamboos, pieces of rope, leftover, lime and sand—into the old enclosure that had served as a makeshift kitchen.

This time too, Mattotosh was not agreeable. His arguments were hollow, though. "Why do you want a double storeyed house—to hit people in the eye?" he demanded.

"A house is built so as to hit people in the eye", replied Mahitosh. It was he who prevailed.

Cartloads of bricks, cement, lime, rolled up before everyone's eyes. Huge iron beams, concrete frames and door pelmets arrived. Mahitosh supervised the work with great enthusiasm, while Manotosh sat still. If the labourers or the mason came with a query when Mahitosh was not at home, Manotosh would say languidly: "Ask the young master when he comes. I am nobody here."



Sometimes, Padma would admonish him, saying: "What kind of behaviour is this? What will brother-in-law and sister-in-law think?"

"What do you mean, what will they think?" Manotosh would reply, "I told them to go to the paymaster, that's all."

Mahitosh had recently got involved in the share market on his own account. He no longer paid any attention to the tamarind trade which the two brothers jointly managed.

When the upper storey was completed, Manotosh insisted that he would not move upstairs. He had never climbed a stairway in his life, and he

was not going to start now, in his old age. He was fine downstairs. But he had to give way. Padma had not taken leave of her senses. It had been decided that the two sisters-in-law would have a room each, upstairs. Padma had sense enough to let her brother-in-law and sister-in-law have the room that faced south. Downstairs, according to the saying "The oldest gets the best", Manotosh had the room that faced south. But then, when the house had been built, the brothers had contributed equally to its construction, while now, Manotosh had no money.

How long could Padma live upstairs and Manotosh downstairs? With heavy heart and downcast looks, he had to go upstairs in the wake of his wife. This time, Mahitosh celebrated the housewarming in grand style.

It was summer. Manotosh lay awake at night, fanning himself and complaining. "To hell with a room like this. Can one live in a room that is closed towards the south? Better live in a cowshed. This sleeping upstairs will be the end of me."

Champa's daughter was in the habit of sleeping with Padma. The heat kept her awake too, so first thing in the morning, she gave her mother a detailed account of all that had been said at night. Now, she was grown up enough to know who her "real mother" was.

One day, while cooking the vegetable, Champa said: "Sister, if brother-in-law doesn't like that room, we can exchange rooms," Startled, Padma answered: "What are you talking about? Why should elders bother themselves with little likes and dislikes?"

"Well, that is for you to know, sister, but after all, he has always slept in the better room, so he may find it difficult now, We have spent half our life in a room that is closed towards the south, but did we ever say a word?" It need hardly be mentioned that however generous Champa's proposal, her tone was not especially tender or reverential. Overcome with shame, Padma tried to dismiss the matter lightly, by giving a

number of examples of her husband's crankiness. Yet, in her heart, she could not help cursing Champa's daughter Chandna. "Well, why shouldn't she turn out a bitter gourd", thought Padma, "When she comes from such a creeper ? What a scorpion the mother is !"

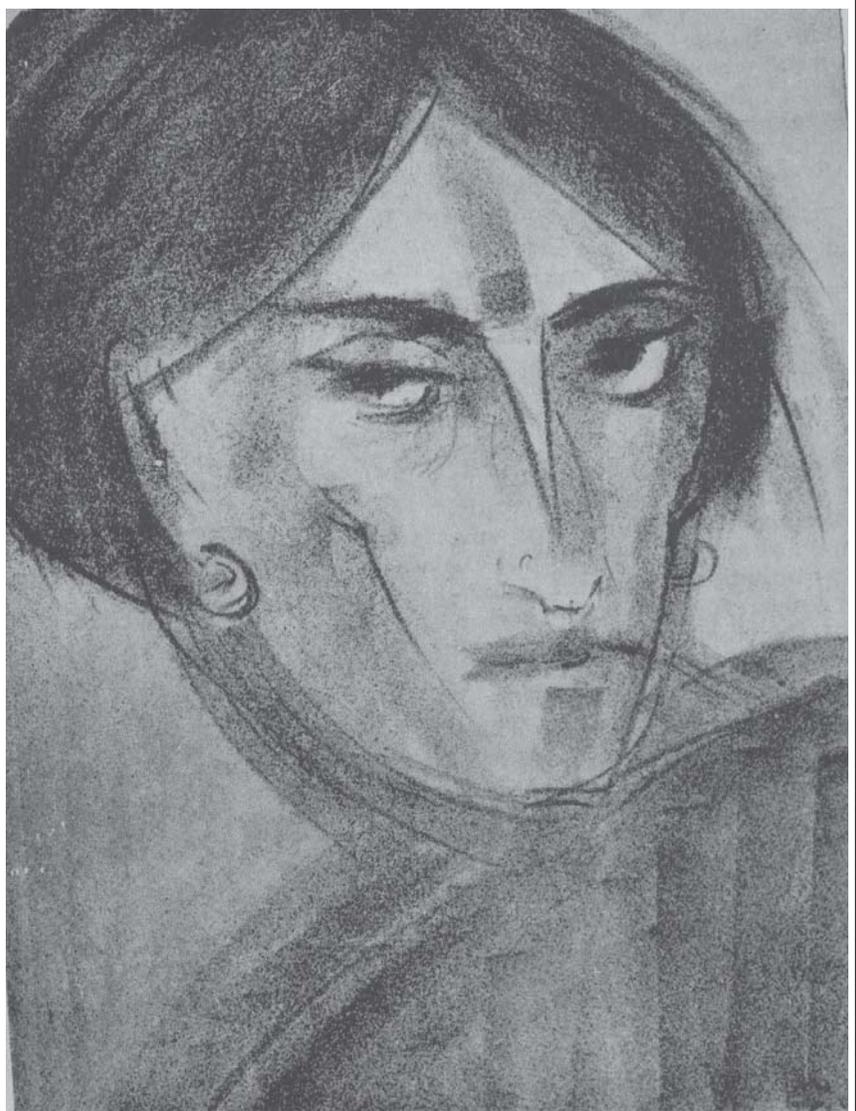
The housewarming had been done in a hurry, but the interior decoration was not yet completed. The childless Padma was the less indolent one. She dusted all the decorations that were kept in the room downstairs, and carried them upstairs to adorn the shining new walls. She collected all the faded, dusty clay birds, fishes and pigeons. Mahitosh used to bring two pairs of everything. Padma also had her own decoration pieces—collected carefully from all the festivals and fairs she had attended. There were Uttara and Abhimanyu in glass, porcelain fairies, pictures embroide-red in gold thread, a tin wall lamp, cork flowers, wooden boxes and so on. There were also cloth flowers and wax toys that she herself had made.

It was the collection of a lifetime. With a great deal of loving care, she placed each one wherever she thought it would look best. When she had finished, she felt ashamed of herself. Just because Champa was a little indolent, should her room lie undecorated ? The next day, she sat down to dust Champa's things. It was afternoon. Champa was sleeping. When she woke up and came down to get her son's meal, she said : "Why are you wasting your time on this useless task, sister ?" Padma replied enthusiastically : "Why useless ? Yesterday I fixed that room. Today I'll fix this one."

Champa burst out laughing, "No, no, sister, no need to take these worthless things upstairs. They'll look dreadful on the new walls. He says he will get a set of china dolls and some nice new pictures for that room."

Padma suddenly seemed to shrink into herself, and like a fool she said : "Then what will happen to all these ?"

Laughing heartily, Champa said: "Happen ? No one is running away with



this room. It's mine. Things will stay as they are. Chitu and Chandna can play with these and break as many of them as they like. Such things in the new room? Lord, what taste !" Champa laid stress on this last phrase. Padma felt as though the whole world was staring at her, and she had nowhere to hide her face. Perhaps only the knower of hearts knows how she managed to get up and leave the room.

There was still a bed lying in the deserted room downstairs. Mahitosh had not taken it upstairs for fear of its getting stuck on the stairway. It was only this bed which witnessed the tears Padma shed that day. The day before, Champa had deliberately not said a word. She had just laughed to herself

and given her husband an account—a lively account of the love and care with which the new room had been decorated with rubbishy old items.

Padma had not suspected that the ugly things on the white walls were of no use to Champa because the previous day, Champa had not let a word escape her lips. Padma could now not even discard the things, That would only give Champa more food for mirth. But he could, would Padma really throw away all those memories of her youth ? Was Champa not a woman ? Had the creator not given her a heart, or not put any tenderness therein ?

After shedding many tears, when Padma finally got up to light the stove for the evening meal, she was angry

neither at Champa nor at her brother in law, but at her own husband. "Is it only Mahitosh who can bring china dolls? Cannot Manotosh collect money enough for a couple of nice pictures?"



After the tamarind trade slackened off, Manotosh became like a retired soldier. Even Padma was not pleased with him. Soon, negotiations began for Chandna's marriage, Mahitosh quietly went to meet different parties. Only Champa knew what was going on. They seemed to think that the older brother would put obstacles in the way of the girl's marriage.

At first, Padma did not understand this so she used to question her brother-in-law closely. It never occurred to her that she could be indifferent to Chandna's welfare. It was Champa's irritation which made her realise that possibility. One day, Mahitosh was trying to evade Padma's simple questions by giving her roundabout answers, when Champa said crossly, from behind her veil: "The marriage will not be conducted behind people's backs. It will take place in front of everyone, I cannot understand why there should be so much curiosity beforehand. After all, we are not in the habit of interfering in other people's business."

Padma understood, and soon gave up her habit of interfering in other people's business. And when the marriage took place in front of everyone, she "saw" so much, "heard" so much, and was so overworked that she fell into a fever.



When a room lies empty, junk collects in it. Padma's room downstairs began to fill up with all kinds of discarded stuff. One day, Mahitosh's eye fell on it. He screamed, shouted, and kicked out the broken baskets, tins of cowdung cakes and the pan of coal. Padma had tied up some old clothes in a bundle, intending to exchange them for utensils. Throwing it out, Mahitosh said: "This room must be cleared out today. A tutor has been appointed for

Chitu. This will be the study room." At first, Chittosh sat and studied on a mat spread on the floor. But gradually, a wooden table, tin chairs, and an old shelf bought at an auction were introduced.

The old enclosure outside was reinforced with two beams. The junk from the room was piled up there along with the bed on which Padma and her husband had slept for 12 years. Well, that was not too bad. In fact, the enclosure was the best ventilated place. On summer afternoons, Padma used to come down and sleep in the enclosure,

came, they had to take refuge in Chitu's study. When Padma came downstairs, carrying her bedding, her limbs burnt with repressed humiliation. When she slept on the floor in the room downstairs, she never remembered how it had looked of old, with its tin roof and with her decoration pieces adorning its walls. It was the same room in which Padma had felt as if she was in heaven, the room at whose walls she had never tired of gazing. But now she could not remember those days at all.

Her heart burnt with the insult of having, in her old age, to come down



so the bed came in useful there.

When a daughter is married, the son-in-law comes to visit, and must be offered not just food but also a bedroom. So a room was needed after Chandna's marriage. Champa had just had another daughter. She was not in a state to keep shifting her bed from one room to another, so it was Padma and Manotosh who had to do the shifting around. Whenever the son-in-law

and sleep in Chitu's study, but she felt embarrassed to make a fuss, and with what face could she dare do so? These days, Manotosh sat at home and did not go to work.



The tug of war did not go on for long. Suddenly, one day, on returning from market, Manotosh caught a fever and within a few hours, he left the upstairs room for ever—that room with

which he had initially been so dissatisfied yet to which he had slowly begun to get attached.

After that, Padma did not want to go upstairs. The neighbours could see all that went on there, and now they were acquainted with many of them. What would they say if they saw her distorted face and her coarse clothing? How could Padma show herself like a ghost to their inquisitive eyes?

Even if that calamity had not befallen her, Padma would have had to leave the room. Chandna had come for her delivery and was to stay a year or so. Where could she stay except in that room?

Mahitosh set the masons to work once again. The whole house was whitewashed, and electricity installed. The skeletons of Padma's old shabby toys were swept out of the way. Champa's younger daughter Anjana, soon made short work of them.

But what was to become of Padma? She could not stay for ever in Chitu's study. He was in college now, and his friends were always dropping in. He had furnished the room with chairs, a table and a sofa. The other room was a sitting room for Mahitosh. He was a working man, after all. How could he manage without a sitting room?

Where could Padma go? It was Chandna who solved the problem. "Big mother can easily stay in the store room", she said. "She's a widow living alone. What does she need a separate room for? At my in-laws' place too, my aunt-in-law lives in the store room. True, there will be a little discomfort, but it can't be helped. One cannot always live in comfort."

"In the storeroom?" said Chitu, with some reluctance.

"Why, what's wrong with the room?" demanded Chandna crossly, "It has a tin roof and firm walls. Earlier, all these rooms had corrugated tin roofs. Don't you remember?"

Of course, Chitu remembered. When the tin had been removed, the clatter had nearly deafened him. The bed was brought from the verandah into

the storeroom. One leg was broken so it was propped up on bricks.

Padma would light the stove in a corner, boil her rice and then go to sleep on the bed. By now, she had lost her health, and was unable to do any housework.

They now had a cook to do the kitchen work. When Champa came to the storeroom to get the food stuffs, she would say loudly, as if addressing the heavens: "The proverb has really proved true in our case. Here am I, slaving myself to death, while this Maharani is fed and clothed without having to lift a finger. What shamelessness—to do nothing but eat and sleep day after day. God, what a way of life!"

They did not have to feed and clothe Padma for long. First, the food was stopped and later the clothes. She had been lying in a fever for a long time. It was clear that she could not be kept in the storeroom. She might well be suffering from some infectious disease. The beam of the enclosure was strengthened, and the junk shifted to make a little space. Padma lay and died in the same place where once the two sisters-in-law used to sit together, eating their rice and fish.

Mahitosh had the house whitewashed again so as to get rid of the germs, and after that, he began to look for a bride for his son. A boy who had brought glory to his ancestors, the first graduate in 14 generations! Proposals came from several good families.

After much cogitation, Mahitosh chose a girl in whom not a flaw could be found, and who brought so much dowry that the neighbouring brahmins and kayasths were left gaping. And why not? Jyotsna's grandfathers and great grandfathers had never even dreamt of having a graduate for a son-in-law!

It was not as if Padma was not mentioned a couple of times during the celebrations, but her loss was hardly felt because she had died quite a while ago. She had got a nice necklace made

from the little gold she had, and had left it for Chitu's wife. Putting the necklace in the bride's hands, Champa said: "Daughter-in-law, there was an aunt of Chitu's, and she left this for you." Jyotsna mentally turned up her nose at the design of the necklace, and immediately decided that she would have it melted down and remade in the metro pattern. That was the only kind of necklace that she did not already possess.

The new bride came from a rich family, and she was also Champa's chosen one. So, leaving her well decorated room for her son and daughter-in-law, Champa shifted into the room that was closed towards the south.

Mahitosh did not have to complain of the lack of air. At the time of the wedding, they had bought several electric fans. It was Chitu who complained. He said: "Mother! Take your heavy cupboard away into your room. It makes me feel suffocated." That was the most expensive piece of furniture in Champa's room. Laying her hand on her cheek, Champa said: "What are you saying? That's the kind of thing you find in Sahebs' houses. It cost Rs 150."

"You hang your expensive things round your neck, mother, I don't want it."

"But you need something to keep the daughter-in-law's jewels and clothes."

Chitu interrupted: "Don't worry about that. Her father is only too eager to refurnish the whole house. He told me the other day that his daughter has always been fond of good furniture, but they are unable to give as much as they want to, because of the lack of space here."

So space had to be created. A lorry came from Jyotsna's house, bringing beds, cupboards, chairs, a dressing table—all of the metro pattern. Champa's cupboard fit for Sahebs, her bed from Bombay, and her big square armchairs lost all their beauty and hung their heads in shame.

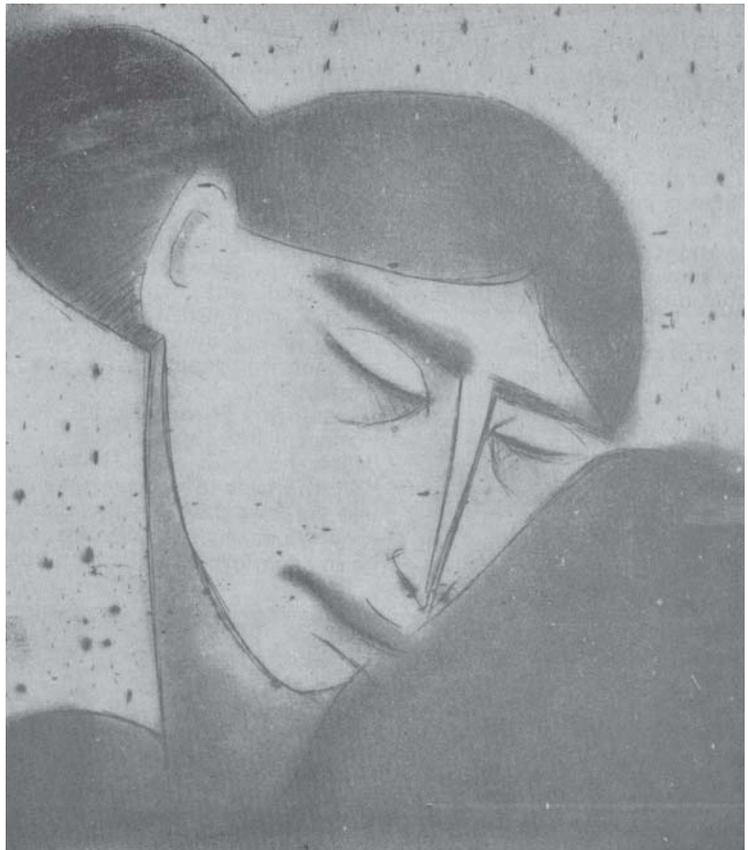
All the property that came from the daughter-in-law's house belonged to Champa. It was her son who was getting all this respect and honour, yet she did not feel much joy. She almost felt annoyed with Mahitosh. Such things were available in the market, but what unrefined taste Mahitosh had ! It was not even as if the things he had bought were cheap. He had paid fancy prices for these huge, clumsy objects. A couple of them filled up a whole room while Jyotsna, with so much furniture in her room, had plenty of space left.

Chandna had gone to her in-laws' place at the time of her brother's wedding. She came back after the bride's arrival. Champa began to sleep in the sitting room with her two daughters and her grandson. So many people could not sleep in Mahitosh's room. He needed to rest and sleep in peace. Besides, he had the fan on all night, and Chandna's son could have caught a chill.

Jyotsna served her father-in-law with great solicitude. She dusted and cleaned his room regularly, Mahitosh was quite taken with his beloved daughter-in-law. A strange jealousy began to creep through Champa's veins but she could not express it. She herself was certainly not as pleased with her daughter-in-law. Chandna too kept finding some fault or other with the new bride. Jyotsna was not unduly perturbed since she had tied her boat securely to the largest tree of all.

The house seemed empty after Chandna went away. Her mischievous son used to create a hubbub all day long. Mahitosh expressed his longing now and then: "It would be nice if Chitu had a son, no ?" ,

Champa could not help show her indifference. "Don't talk nonsense. They haven't even been married a year." Mahitosh fell silent but he longed to hear the gurglings of a baby. His desire was not fulfilled. Perhaps because it was too strong. Within a year of Chitu's marriage, Mahitosh died, after lying three days in a fever. At that time Jyotsna was expecting, and had gone



-Kanchan

to her parents' house.

If a grandson had been born instead of a granddaughter, perhaps things would have been different. Champa just could not feel happy with a girl. She felt a girl would bring bad luck. Jyotsna did not take long to understand this. She was a woman of few words so she kept her own counsel. But ever since the tree to which she had tethered her boat had been uprooted, she had taken the boat into midstream and had dropped anchor there.

Chandna was not happy at her in-laws' place. Money is not everything. Her mother-in-law was a quarrelsome village woman. Chandna spent a lot of time at her parents' house but Jyotsna put an end to this practice. How she managed it was her own secret. Champa began to feel, helpless after her daughter left. She felt as if the roots of her activity were being pulled up one by one. She felt this even in small matters.

One day, Chitu said : "Mother, I am

going to buy a radio."

"What ?" said Champa, surprised. "What are you buying ?" She was not very familiar with the word.

"Radio", said Chitu, and explained: "It's a kind of singing machine."

Champa replied gravely with an undertone of bitterness: "No, son, there is no need to buy a singing machine. He very much wanted to buy one, but his wish could not be fulfilled. He was so busy fulfilling the needs of the household, the family, that he never got round to buying it."

Undeterred, Chitu replied: "This is not the same thing at all. You hear songs from it but there are no records."

"Whatever it may be, it does sing. What will the neighbours say if there is music and singing in the house at such a time of sorrow ?"

Suddenly, Jyotsna interrupted from upstairs. "Then all music and singing would come to a stop throughout the city, mother. Is there no mourning or sorrow in other houses ?"

This was the first time she had spoken to her mother-in-law in Chitu's presence. Champa was speechless. She even forgot to reply. Chitu went away, looking annoyed.

For some days after that, they stopped talking to each other. Finally, Champa decided to tell Anjana to say that they could buy the singing machine if they wanted to. The same evening, however, Chitu, on his way home, bought a radio. Despite its different appearance, Champa could not understand the difference between a singing machine and a radio. Poems, songs, rhymns—there were all the same things that one heard from a singing machine.

After that came a cradle for the baby and a sewing machine for the daughter-in-law. Jyotsna went home and fetched all her childhood toys, books and her harmonium. All this could not fit into one room. Chitu raised the matter through Anjana. Did Champa really need the upstairs room? She was quite old, she must find it difficult to climb up and down. She and Anjana could easily stay in Chitu's study. Chitu now used his father's sitting room.

Champa came downstairs to Padma's old room bringing with her the cupboard fit for Sahebs, the Bombay bed, and a trunkful of utensils. The bed could not fit into the room because there was no space. Lots of household goods had gradually been converted into junk. Things that at one time had been prized possessions had become useless now. All the things which were not usable yet could not be thrown away began to accumulate in that room.

Around this time, Chitu got Anjana married, without any pomp and show. Why make a big fuss? None of the refined people does so nowadays. The question of entertaining the son-in-law did not arise. It was hard enough to feed him, but even harder to have him stay overnight. Where was the room?

Gradually, the fifties got underway, bringing with them shortages, hard

times, independence and so on. The special fruits of independence were the refugees. The houseowners' fortunes began to look up. Anyone who had a room to spare began to mint money. The eastern wind began to spread in all directions. One after another, every house in the neighbourhood made space for a tenant. Money came in—30, 40 or 100—as much as one could extract. It was difficult to restrain one's greed.

Chitu raised the matter with great finesse, after beating about the bush for a while. If they rented out the two downstairs rooms, they could easily get Rs 60 or 70. A colleague at the office was pestering him every day. Their standard of living would really improve with such an addition to their income.

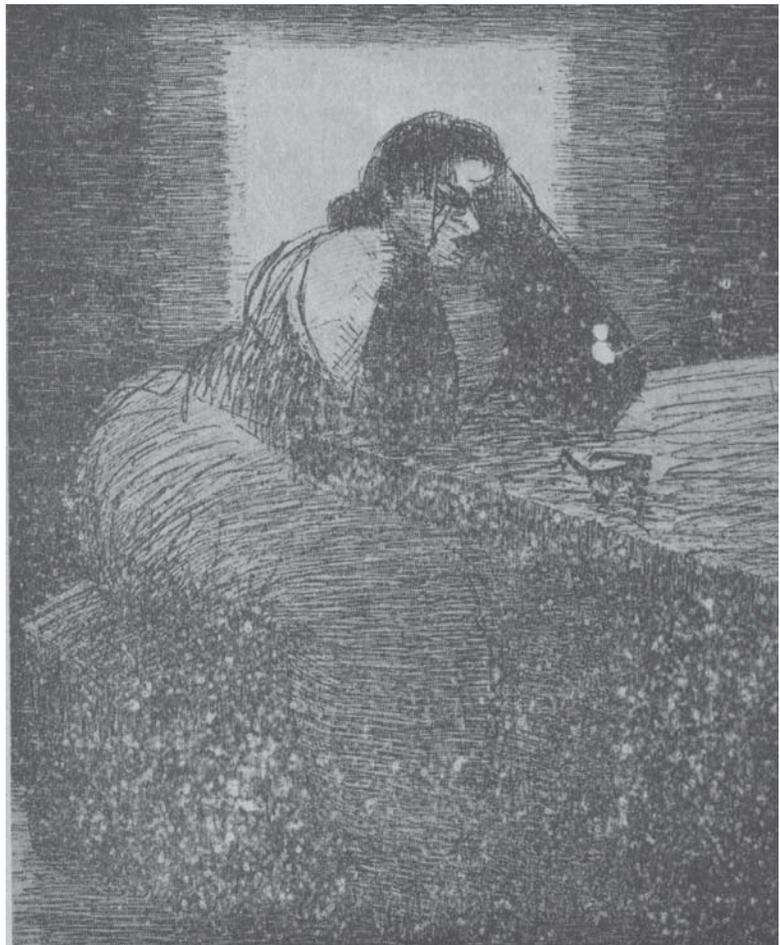
Champa stared at her son as if she could not believe her ears. When Chitu finished his speech, she said, showing

indifference: "If you rent out two rooms how can we manage?"

Suddenly discarding his casual manner, Chitu spoke solemnly as befits the head of a household: "We will have to manage. We can't just get away by saying that we cannot manage. Perhaps we won't be so comfortable. Perhaps there will be a little discomfort. But that cannot be helped."

So comfortable? Was Champa so comfortable that the sight irked others? Others, meaning Chitu. Had Chitu not lived in this house in Champa's heyday? Had Chitu not seen her sit at the window of the upstairs room, crocheting lace? Is that why he was telling her to leave the comfort of the godown downstairs, and to put up with a little more discomfort?

Yes, of course, it was just a little discomfort, nothing more! Had Champa considered it a great affliction for Padma to have had to take refuge in the



-Kanchan

storeroom? Champa too was a widow living alone. Why did she need a whole room to herself ?

After Mahitosh's death, when Champa had taken out the old stove which Padma had used to cook her plain, unspiced food, could she have imagined that she would soon have to use Padma's kitchen as well ?

The corrugated tin was in disrepair. The slightest breeze sent flakes showering down on one's body. Rats scrambled around, crickets hopped and jumped. It was impossible to sleep. Did

Champa weep ? Not at all. Then what did she think as she lay there, silent ? Did she try to imagine what Padma's state of mind must have been?

After some months, Chitu used the accumulated house rent to call in the masons. A new parapet was built upstairs. Jyotsna was very keen to have a parapet. The corrugated roofs of the two rooms at the back could not be changed, because the money was all used up. But those rooms were at the back, after all. Seen from the front, the house was pretty as a picture, with its

pink walls, deep green doors and windows, and parapets arched in the Raniganj style.

One day, as Champa was returning after her dip in the Ganges, she happened to look up at it, and was struck speechless.

(translated from Bengali into Hindi by Pushpa Jain in "Bara Bang la Shrestha Kahaniyan" edited by hsr, and translated from Hindi into English by Manushi)

ON August 22, 1982, Vimla, wife of Raghu Kumar, and mother of a 13 month old girl, Sivani, died in her house in Hyderabad. Her husband's story is that he was sleeping in the house at the time but did not hear any cries. When he finally woke up and managed to break down the door of the bathroom, he found her lying on the floor, seriously burnt and with half of one leg completely severed from her body.

On August 23, Vimla's uncle submitted a police complaint, saying that he suspected foul play. However, the police, accepting as sufficient evidence the alleged suicide note produced by Raghu Kumar, registered a case of suicide. They did not make an enquiry or conduct an examination of the house. No fingerprints were taken, nor was the kerosene tin or other evidence seized. Raghu Kumar was allowed to get the bathroom whitewashed, thus destroying all evidence there. The suicide note was not even sent to a handwriting expert, until orders were received from the court.

Vimla's body was sent for post mortem on August 22, at 5 p.m., under the escort of the assistant subinspector and a constable. The body was received at the hospital, which is only a few kilometres away, on August 23, at 2 p.m. What happened to the body for about 21 hours is not known.

Raghu Kumar says that Vimla put an end to her life because of her ill health, but the doctors under whose

Appeal To Supreme Court

—Enquiry Into Vimla's Death In Hyderabad

treatment she was say that she was suffering from a very common complaint, and was certainly not in a condition that could induce her to commit suicide.

Further, the letters written by Vimla to her sister Durga clearly show that she and her daughter were suffering severe maltreatment and torture at the hands of Raghu Kumar. In these letters, Vimla narrated how even while running temperature, she had to work ceaselessly and had to produce sumptuous meals, how she was not given any medical treatment, and was

subjected to sexual intercourse when she was ill. She said that her husband was in the habit of abusing and beating both her and the baby. She wrote : "Sivani is wearing the shoes gifted by you because my husband never buys anything for her. Unless he gives, I do not have a penny with me. I have to account for every penny. I am real scared of marriage. I am afraid that I may end my life like the woman in the film *Amme Katha*, who was tortured to death by her husband." Vimla also repeatedly wrote that her husband hated, beat and tortured the baby. At



Vimla's request, Durga had torn up many such letters, but two that had been preserved were presented to the police, who saw fit to overlook them.

The inquest was conducted by three panchayatdars, two of whom are close relatives of Raghu Kumar while the third is his friend. No independent panchayatdar was summoned for the inquest. The press, using the police reports as their source, reported that this was a clear case of suicide, but "interested parties and women's organisations" were trying to make it appear a murder.

In 1982, Amrita Chhachi of Saheli filed a writ petition in the supreme court. Strong medical evidence was cited to show that it was not possible for Vimla to have burnt herself to death. Doctors stated that heat fracture is a very rare occurrence, and when it does take place, there will be some loss of intervening bone, not a clean break as in Vimla's case. Also, the lower parts of

Vimla's body were burnt the most, to a depth of three centimetres, while the upper parts were much less burnt. This suggests that some person was refuelling the fire and deliberately burning some parts of the body so as to obliterate any trace of injuries previously inflicted on her. Since there was no use of supportive fuel like 'wood, the extent and depth of burns on her legs could have been caused only by refuelling which the victim could not have done. Examination of the respiratory tract and stomach shows that Vimla died very soon after the burning began, and therefore could not have refuelled the fire.

The supreme court ordered a CBI enquiry. The CBI sent an investigating officer DSP Narayan to conduct the enquiry. Stree Shakti Sangathana, which had investigated the case, and had also staged protest demonstrations before the house and before the police station, has recently

written a letter to the supreme court, pointing out that Narayan is "deliberately watering down evidence and neutralising: damaging statements with a view to clear Raghu Kumar."

In the letter they describe how Narayan outright refuses to believe the evidence of neighbours, and also says that "we cannot take intimate letters between sisters seriously. Sisters write all sorts of things to each other." On the other hand,, he takes the letters exchanged between Vimla and her husband as proof of their connubial bliss. His conversation shows that he implicitly accepts Raghu Kumar's narration of events as "facts." The Sangathana has therefore asked that the court pass strictures on Narayan, and institute an enquiry into his mode of functioning, since his incoirpetence and bias amount to contempt of the court's order.

(compiled from material sent by Stree Shakti Sangathana)

Two Thoughts On One Theme

Creation

Around her men gape

*yawn,
poke,
push,
look important.*

Next to her I gaze,

*fidget,
think unnecessary
thoughts.*

Only she

*is silent
and in motion.*

Fingers flutter,

needle works like a mad machine.

Beneath her shaping hands

grow band upon band of colour.

Her eyes focused, her lips puckered.

Between Patel Nagar

and Scindia House,

she sees to it

that a child's head

will be warm this winter.

—Ruth Vanita



Double Bind

You knit, knit, knit

Through cold winter months.

One for your little baby,

One for your boy,

One for the cold man

You are trying hard to warm.

And who knits for you, dear ?

The world knits your life for you

While you knit your life away.

-Prabha Rani