

She Dared To Dream

—An Interview With Asha Apradh



Asha, tell me about your family and your childhood.

I was born in a Sunni Muslim family. I live in a predominantly Hindu neighbourhood called Andevadi. My mother comes from a village called Panhala. She belongs to a peasant family. She is totally illiterate. No one in their family is educated. They work on their land. My father lost whatever land he had in a dispute with my uncle. My father worked as a book binder in a private company. He had studied upto BA and used to give tuitions to children of the neighbourhood. Hearing him teach them, I picked up a lot and could count upto 200 when I was about six years old. My father realised that I was bright so he wanted me to become something in life.

I was the first child and after me, five more girls were born. My father named me Asha (hope) but it seems I have always brought *nirasha* (disappointment) to everyone. My mother never liked me, perhaps because after my birth, she gave birth to five more girls. She was opposed to the idea of my studying.

My mother is hot tempered while my father had a serene nature. I studied up to the eighth class. Then my father died of a heart attack. I was only 13 at the time.

Why did your mother oppose your studying ?

She said : “What is the use of studying ? Ultimately, you will end up

in the kitchen, won't you ? If a woman knows how to cook and keep house, she will be happy in her in-laws' place. Studies won't help her in any way.” It was not as if I did not know how to do house work. Being the eldest, I did a lot of work at home. My mother deliberately used to give me so much work that I got no time to study. Though I studied only at school, not at home, yet I stood first in class.

What happened after your father's death ?

When my father died, a problem arose. Who would be responsible for our family ? My mother's sister's son was staying with us at the time. He had come from his village to learn driving here. My relatives decided that I should marry him. Then he would stay in our house and support the family. He would be a ghar damad. He was about 13 years older than I was.

I was 14 years old. I had come of age just a month before my marriage. I resisted the proposal. I wanted to study. I had no desire to get married. I was doing well at school, participating in debates, winning prizes. But my mother insisted that I get married. One day, she beat me up, saying: “If you don't get married, what will become of the other girls ? I am not going to educate you any further. If you want to study, get out of the house.” Everyone

pressurised me and forced me into this marriage. I wept a lot during the wedding ceremony. I did not like anything about the boy, and besides, I had no wish to marry. I was married off like a living corpse. At the age of 15, I became the mother of a baby girl. After that, I had three more daughters.

Did you want so many children, or did you think of using birth control methods ?

No. How could I think ? I was only a child. The fourth baby was born when I was 20 years old. At that time, I knew nothing of the world outside. As for my husband, he had studied up to class seven, and he worked as a driver. He neither knew of these things, nor did he care to know. In fact, when I was married, I did not know anything about sex or how children are born. When I came to know, I fell sick.

Why did that happen ?

I hated the idea of sexual relations. I don't know why, but it disgusted me. At the age of 13, girls cannot think of such things. I had just started menstruating, and then these relations began. I had not imagined or dreamt of any such thing. I was not even constitutionally developed to take it. I had lived the life of a simple child.

My husband could not understand my feelings nor did he realise why I felt that way. As evening approached, I

used to start trembling and perspiring with agitation. I used to wish that night would not come. For two months after marriage, I kept resisting. Finally, he forced me. It seems to me that I was raped. I suffered a lot of pain and fell sick for some days. I could not tell anyone about this. I felt ashamed to tell anyone.

Did your mother know about it ?

How could I tell her ? I think there has always been a distance between my mother and me. She is my mother only insofar as she gave birth to me but I have never felt that she gave me the love of a mother. There has been no emotional relationship between us. I think she always detested me. It was my father who loved me. I used to go out with him, and if I wanted anything, I would ask him. I slept near him. He played the role of both father and mother to me.

Didn't you have any girl friends ?

My friends were little girls of my age, and they were not yet married. What could I tell them ? I buried all these things in my heart.

What was life like, otherwise, after marriage ?

I was pressured into everything. My desires and aspirations remained in my heart. I felt unfulfilled in every way. I never laughed or felt pleasure in anything. I became anemic and my health suffered a lot because of the deliveries every alternate year. At nights, I used to dream of my school, my books, my friends and teachers. I never dreamt of anything else. But I was submerged in housekeeping. I was completely confined to the house. For 10 years after my marriage, I never even went as far as the vegetable market. I never went out anywhere. From morning to night, I was working —cleaning utensils, cooking, washing clothes, looking after the children. I did most of the work singlehanded. Even if I had to work till 11 at night, no one would offer to lend a hand. When I would go for delivery to the hospital, I would go straight from the kitchen to the ward. My hands would be covered with flour and would be washed only in the

hospital. I never complained. I used to just cry quietly.

The neighbour women used to notice that I had to toil like this, even in the last stages of pregnancy, but they did not dare say anything because they were afraid of my mother's temper. I too am afraid of my mother. I find it hard to open my mouth in her presence.

What was your financial situation ? Did you get any money in your hands ?

My husband earned about Rs 450 a month as salary. He also got about Rs 20 a day in tips since he worked as driver



of a tourist bus. The financial situation was all right. We bore the expenses of all my sisters' marriages and deliveries.

I never asked for money and my husband never gave me any. What did I need money for ? I wore the saris my mother bought me and the blouses she stitched. I was like a person buried alive.

When I was expecting my fourth child, all of us went on a picnic trip to Vishalgarh. On the way, there was an accident. The tractor and trolley fell off the hill path into the valley. All of us were thrown out. My husband and his cousin fell under the tractor. The cousin died. He had a wife and three children. My husband sustained five fractures and had to stay in hospital for six months. I also got badly hurt and was unconscious for two days. Since I was the one who had persuaded my cousin-

in-law to come on this trip, everyone in the family blamed me for his death.. My mother said : "You are ill omened. When you were in my womb, my brother-in-law died. After you were born, I gave birth only to daughters. You were the bringer of all these girls. And just before your marriage, your father died. You have always brought us ill luck, never any happiness. Why did you survive the accident ? Why don't you go and commit suicide ? So, *didi*, I tried to kill myself. I went to a doctor and said that I was suffering from sleeplessness. Then I took the prescription and bought about eight sleeping pills. But I failed—perhaps the pills were,; too few or they were not strong enough.

I was six months' pregnant at the time. I lay unconscious in hospital for two days, But after that my real life began. Perhaps women do not die so easily, after all.

How did your real life begin after that ?

After my attempt at suicide failed, my thinking underwent a change. I thought : "If I die, I will escape this hard life, but what will become of my daughters ? My mother will not look after them well. If my husband marries again, who will love these girls? I felt I was doing injustice to them. Then I decided to live for the children. I thought : "What kind of life is this ? Is there any kind of security ? After all, my husband is a driver and it is a risky job. As soon as he suffers an accident or falls sick, the whole household comes to a dead end. What if another accident occurs ?" So I decided to study and to make something of myself.

At that time, I did not know how far this intellectual quest would take me and whether or not I would be able to get out of that rut. I had no self confidence left. I borrowed some books from the neighbours' children and read them. I found that I could understand those books. Then I contacted some of my former classmates and told them about my life. Some of them were studying in college, some had jobs and were earning. They encouraged me to study

and told me I Would definitely succeed.

When I told my family that I Wanted to study, there was an uproar. My mother said : “Study ? What will our community say ? They will chew betel and spit it in our faces. We will not be able to show ourselves in public. Have you ever heard of an old woman like you trying to study?” My sisters too said : “Look at her, she’s a mother of four children and she wants to study !” My mother tore up the application forms that my friends had got for me. I could do nothing but cry.

What was your husband’s reaction?

He opposed me. He said: “Why do you want to study? What do you lack ? You get food and a sari to wear. What more do you want?” I tried to explain that I wanted to build a future for my children. He said : “We will educate them up to class seven and then we’ll get them married to their cousins and they will work in the fields. What more do they need ?” I did not want my daughters to have nothing in their life but the kitchen and the fields. I wept and screamed but all to no avail. Everyone said : “We are Muslims. Women should stay in parda. There is no honour outside parda. A disobedient woman will go to hell.”

I was so badly affected that I almost lost my memory. This was the combined effect of this setback and of the family’s reaction to my fourth daughter’s birth. When she was born, no one came to see me in the hospital. My mother-in-law said : “Kill her. Who wants so many girls ? Don’t give her milk.” My husband was also very angry. He did not come to see me even once while I was in hospital. It was a neighbour woman who came to the hospital and fetched me home on the fourth day after delivery. At home, I was immediately set to work. I was not given the usual nourishing food, like ghee, fine rice and so on, that is given to women after childbirth. They said: “Why should you have that food? Have you given birth to a son?” They used to say “*Chhori yani chori*’ that is, a girl is nothing but a theft, I wept a lot at the thought that this child of mine was so hated. I was terribly disappointed at yet another girl. Only the child’s crying used

to rouse me from my daze. I had become like a stone. I neither spoke nor smiled. The doctors feared that I might die.

At this time, my maternal grand-father came on a visit. When he saw my state, he said : “Why do you torture her like this? What wrong has she done ? In what way was the accident her fault ? You need not have gone on the trip if you didn’t want to go. If she wants to study now, let her study.” He gave me Rs 50 for the admission fee. So the others gave in, though very unwillingly. I started studying for the matriculation examination.

No one agreed willingly. It was, as they say, like throwing money to an



importunate beggar. That was how they finally let me study. My husband was afraid that if I studied, I would grow proud and would despise him. He did not like the idea of my going to college where boys also studied. I explained that I would study privately and there was no question of my becoming proud. I was doing all this because of our family circumstances. The income was clearly not enough to support our family. That is why I wanted to help. Now that I was a mother of four children, how could I shirk my duty or start thinking too highly of myself ? I told my husband that if he let me study it would be proof of his generosity, not of my pride. I said I would always be grateful to him if he was kind enough to let me study. Finally, he said : “All right, all right, study.”

Everyone in the family tried to discourage me. They used to say: “Our brothers have appeared for matriculation dozens of times bu have

not been able to pass. How do you expect to pass ?” My maternal uncle also told me : “I appeared eight times but I could not pass. How can you pass, when yo have these children to look after? Look, right now nobody calls you a fool for not having studied. But if you appear and fail, everyone will laugh at you for your pride in thinking you would pass.”

But my former schoolteacher encouraged and helped me. The used to lend me books.

How many months did you study before taking the examination ?

Six months.

Did you attend classes ?

No, I studied at home. I took Marathi, Hindi, Sociology and Science as subjects. No one gave me time to study. So while I was washing utensils I would keep ; book propped up on the threshold in front of me. When I washed clothes, I would keep a book on the window sill. I would keei reading while I was cooking or rocking the baby’s cradle. I hardly slept in those days. I was as though suffering from insomnia. The thoughts that filled my head would not let me sleep. But I tried not to let any thought except that of my studies come into my mind. Because as soon as my attention got slightly distracted, the accident would come to mind. I would remember that I had persuaded my cousin-in-law to come along with us. I would wonder whether I was really guilty of causing his death His family had even called me a murderer. Ever since, I do not go to my in-laws’ village where his wife stays.

What does she do ?

What can she do, poor thing ? She has not died so she is alive, The family is very cruel to her, They treat her bitterly and harshly, She is not allowed to wear nice clothes or to comb her hair properly. They won’t even allow her to bathe more often than once jn 18 days. They will say : “What are you decking yourself up for ?” She has two sons and a daughter but they have been taught to despise their mother. She is my age but she looks an old woman of 50. She will not survive much longer,

How did you do in the matriculation examination ?

I got a first division with 62 percent marks. I stood first among the girls of the local school. People there could hardly believe it. They kept checking the list to make sure there was no mistake. My former teachers were glad and so was I. I had been afraid that I would fail and everyone would laugh at me. When I passed, the people at home got a shock. For the first time, they realised that I was not such a fool as they had thought I was.

To study further, I had to pass an examination in English. I had never studied English. I had picked up a little by overhearing my father giving tuitions to the neighbours' children. So I started attending a tuition class every morning from 5.30 to 6.30. That was the only time I could get away from house work. I used to be back home by the time the others woke up. I passed this English examination with 55 percent marks.

After this, I wanted to do BA first year. My husband got angry and said : "Now you want to go to college ? Your desires keep on growing, it seems." I said* "No, I won't go to college. I'll study at home. You won't be inconvenienced in any way." I studied privately and passed with 58 percent marks.

Did you have any help?

No, I studied on my own. My desire kept growing. The people at home were annoyed with me. They hardly spoke to me. They would pass comments like : "Look at her, wanting to study more and more, putting on airs !"

How did you find time to study ?

I used to study while doing housework. In the afternoon, I got a couple of hours off. My desire to do something, my aim, possessed me in such a way that I could do without much sleep. A few hours of sleep were enough for me. I found happiness only in studying.

When I wanted to do the second year of BA, again objections were raised : "Now you are going too far. You said you wanted to study just to pass time.

Now what are you up to ?" I said : "Look, has the family been put to any discomfort ? Have you been inconvenienced in any way ? Am I not doing all the housework ?" With great difficulty, after much begging and pleading, I managed to study. Then I said : "If I don't study for the third year, I will not get the BA degree. What is the use of studying so far if I don't get the degree?". So they gave in, though grudgingly. I passed BA in the second division.

Were you given some relief from housework in the days before the examination ?

No, I had to do all the work. My



health was adversely affected. I had huge dark circles under my eyes and I had become very thin. It was my aim which enabled me to go forward. There was a sort of song in my heart telling me that the dawn would surely break, that I should not lose courage. I should wait for that dawn.

After passing BA, I said to my husband : "Now you may have realised that I am not an idiot. I have some ability. Now I want to do MA." I think he had realised by then that I had something in me. I was able to look after about 15 or 16 people in the house, and yet study.

How were there so many ?

Myself, my husband, four children, my mother and mother-in-law. Then my sisters and their children were always

coming and going. Every year one or other of them was pregnant or having a baby. They used to come home for each delivery. One of my sisters has just had a baby 15 days ago. She came to stay with us one and a half months ago. It has been like this ever since they got married.

Anyway, my husband said : "Do as you like. Will you obey me if I forbid you to study ? You ask me as if you want my permission but will you stop if I tell you to stop ?" Then I answered : "No, I will not stop. I will study even if you forbid me." So I studied and did MA. I began to attend afternoon classes. Though I was registered as an external candidate, the teachers gave me permission to attend classes as and when I could. They appreciated my desire to study. I used to wake up early and get through the housework by noon, then take the bus, reach college by 1.30, attend class till 5 and be back by 6. I passed MA in Hindi with 51 percent marks.

Then I thought of taking a job. I did not want a clerical job. I wanted to be a teacher because I like the atmosphere of the educational world. To become a lecturer, it is necessary in this state to have B Ed degree, so I am now studying for the B Ed examination which I will complete this year. The principal of the training college where I study is a woman. She is very sympathetic and supportive to me.

Do you attend regular classes now?

Yes. I find it difficult because I have to do a lot of housework as well as attend classes. I have to do the marketing and look after the kids.

Doesn't your husband help ?

No. He doesn't get the time. He has odd duty hours. Now he works as a driver for the state transport corporation. If he leaves at 10 a.m. one day, he will not be back until the next morning. He does not even know in which class which of his daughters studies ! I have to see to everything. I go to the school when necessary. These days, my mother is at home because of

my sister's delivery. Otherwise, she goes out to visit relatives and then I have to manage singlehanded.

Has your husband's attitude changed in any way ?

When he sees that I have a lot of difficulty, he says: "Why must you keep studying ? Give it up now. What do you lack, after all?" I say : "I lack everything. Will we spend our whole life like this, in a state of deprivation?"

Of what do you feel deprived ?

The economic problem is most worrying. We have no resources— no land, no business, no house. We have to manage just on his salary which is now about Rs 1,000. The children's education, clothing, food— it's very hard to manage. We have to deny ourselves so many things.

I feel intellectually deprived too. There is no mental communication between my husband and me. We cannot discuss anything together.

Do you get any sort of emotional support from him ?

How can I ? There is a sort of distance between us. I am somewhat romantic. If at night, I stop to look at the moon, he will say: "Why are you looking at the moon now ? Don't you feel cold, standing out in the open ?" If I feel happy looking at a flower in bloom, he will say : "What is there to see in that ?" How can I explain what I see in it ? This is not something that can be explained.

Do you think you have got any kind of satisfaction at all from marriage ?

No, nothing at all. I will say that I have got nothing from marriage.

Not even physical satisfaction ?

Look, I have developed a lot. I have changed. My imagination of love, of sex, has changed. But where can I find a response to what I imagine ? I tell myself that it is not in my fate. That is all.

You said that initially you experienced sexual relations as rape. Does it continue to be like that ?

No, no. Afterwards, I got used to it. I didn't feel any pain. That disgust — perhaps human beings can make a habit

of anything. Even slavery ceases to feel like slavery and does not seem wrong. It became a routine. I did not know what pleasure was. I could not imagine it. When I came to imagine it, I could do nothing. What could I do?

If it brings you no satisfaction, do you think you will spend your life in this marriage bond ?

Yes, I will have to. It is too late to go back to that turn of the road. I feel that the most important desire of my life, the desire to become something, has been fulfilled. And after all, who can have all their desires fulfilled ? When we fulfil one desire, we begin to desire something larger.

I feel that I am living the life I wanted. Now I am freer to go where I like. I have come to talk to you at this late hour in the evening. A year ago, this would have been impossible. I could not even go to the market. I have begun to live the life I wanted.

But you have been so nervous about getting back today. (Asha had left home at about 7 p.m. and returned much after 10 p. m.) Do you ever imagine a day when you will have the freedom to return home at whatever time you like, without having to face anger and disapproval ?

No. Right now, I can't even imagine such freedom.

How do you See your future ?

I see many things in my future. You see, my mother and everyone else used always to curse me, saying that I am dark and ugly. My sisters are fairer than I am. I thought I really was ugly so I did not like to go out and let people see me. Now I go to college, I have women friends like you, who are fond of me. They tell me I have nice eyes, I have a nice voice. I was surprised to hear this. I did not know my own abilities. Others made me aware of what I am. Then I began to think that though I am not beautiful, there must be something attractive in me.. My friends say so.

This struggle has brought out the best in me. I feel that I will go ahead and become something worthwhile. Apart from becoming a lecturer, perhaps I may become a social activist too. I do not

want other women and girls to suffer as I had to.

Not all girls retain the strong desire to become something. The atmosphere of the home drags them down. There is a popular saying "*Chulhe ki lakdi ko chulhe mein dahi hai*" (fuel wood must be in the stove). What else is it good for ? People repeat such sayings the time, so that girls despair of achieving anything..I want to encourage girls, to tell them they can make something of themselves.

How will you bring up your daughters ?

I will let them study as much they want to. I will not force it into anything. I will help *them* economically and intellectually. They won't have to struggle as I did. I will be understanding. They are fortunate to have such a mother.

Do they think so ?

Yes, they do. They have seen how I studied. They see how much hardship I have to endure. I also tell them about my past life. They realise that with all the facilities that they have, they should do even more than I was able to do. That is why my eldest daughter says: "Mother, I should get higher marks than you did in the matriculation should I not ?" They have developed self confidence and will power.

Where do you think you got will power ?

One needs to be able to dream and also have the overpowering desire to translate the dream into reality. When I passed matric felt very encouraged. I realised that I really could do something that I was capable. I thought effort I had put in had been worthwhile, and that if I tried, I could win the battle. When a prize knows the day of release is approaching, all hardships seem tolerable. So also, the work did not seem heavy to me because I used to think: "This will not continue for ever. Ten years hence things will change. I will see better days." It was *this ashavad* (optimism, philosophy of hope) that kept me going. In dreams, I used to see myself standing in an academic gown, hold the degree in my hand.

Has your mother changed her attitude?

Yes, I think she likes the idea that I will get a job and bring in some money. So her opposition has decreased.

When you become a lecturer, will you still have to do all the housework?

Of course, I will have to do it. But once I get money in my hand, I will have some power to decide. I will keep someone to do the housework so that I can spend some time doing the things I want to do but for which I have no time now, like reading, writing poems..

Does that mean that a woman can free herself of domestic work only by employing another woman to do it?

Well, now the children are older and they do help a lot with the work. My husband too has started helping a bit but he does not have much time. Even if we do not keep a servant, we can manage.

How do your neighbours react to your new way of life ?

Our neighbours are not of our community. They have seen my life—how I was married off, how I struggled to study. They feel proud of me, they appreciate my efforts. Some women of our community feel somewhat jealous of me. Perhaps they are not to blame. Perhaps their husbands praise me and denigrate them in private. I gather as much from their conversation. I do not feel angry when they seem jealous of me. I feel sad that they were not able to develop their potential.

A number of people in our community hate me still. The Behmais and others who are tablik are very strict and orthodox. They do not let women go out of the house or see films. They do not speak to me nor do I talk to them. We pass each other on the road without acknowledging each other. They pass disparaging remarks like : “When a woman studies, her husband should wear bangles.” At first, my husband used to listen quietly. Now he answers them back.

Has your husband ever beaten you?

No, never. He lived in our house for some years before our marriage. He knew

my temperament and he was influenced by the atmosphere of our family. My father was very calm and peaceful by nature. So my husband does not drink or smoke. He does not even abuse me. Once he did abuse me but I told him : “Look, this hurts me very much. Don’t use such language. I would prefer that you give me a slap than that you use such language.” I think he has also changed of late. Formerly, he used to be ashamed that his wife was studying. Now he says proudly that his wife is an MA.

Are you the first girl in your family to have studied so much ?

Yes, I am the first. I think some of the younger girls may study in future. My brothers-in-law do not talk to me. Before coming to this meeting, I had



gone to my sister’s house. Her husband said to me : “Why do you study ? Because you want to earn for the children ? I am ready to adopt one of your daughters. I will educate her and get her married. But you should not go out like this. Stay at home. There are men in your college. It does not look nice.” I answered “How will you look after my daughter ? You got my sister sterilised because you did not want any more children. How will you afford to bring up my child ? And if you do, will I not be indebted to you all my life long ? My children are my responsibility, not yours.” He did not like that ! Today, when I came out of the house at 7 p.m., all of them were staring at me because I

was going out alone in the evening.

What do your brothers-in-law do?

One of them is a driver, one has a fruit shop and another a general store. Only one of them works on the land in the village. My sister also has to work in the fields. She has to work very hard I advised her to stop working in the fields and to take tuitions instead. It was I who insisted that my other sisters should not marry into families where they would have to work on the land.

Why did you not like the idea of their working on the land ?

Most of the women in our community have to work in family fields. They do 80 percent of the work. They prepare the soil, do the weeding, sowing, reaping, the collection of fuel, fodder, firewood. They look after the animals and also, of course, the housework. They also grow vegetables and come by bus to sell them in the town. It is a very hard life. There is so much work that they do not get time to comb their hair for two or three days in a row. Often, they have to work in the fields till 8 at night. When they protest, they are told : “If you don’t work in the family field, who will ? After all, it is not someone else’s field you are working in. “They work about 16 or 17 hours a day. They get up at 4 in the morning and sleep around 11 at night.

Yet girls are not wanted ?

No. How much screaming and crying there was when my daughters were born ! I myself used to weep. I wanted a son so that he could become owner of the house. In this last year, I have changed quite a lot. I think we can give what we have to the girls.

Do women of your community have land rights ?

No, not at all. When a man dies, his brothers get his land. The widow has no right. Her brothers-in-law are supposed to maintain her. Regardless of what the law may say, this is the actual situation in the village.

What do you think are the special problems faced by Muslim women ?

The problem of verbal talak is very serious. Often when a woman goes to her parents’ house for delivery, the man

gets married again in her absence, *Talak* is very common in our community. I know of about 20 cases out of the 100 families who are closely related to us. The woman is not consulted and she cannot object to being divorced. Or the husband may marry again. She can do nothing. A divorced woman can marry again but she is called *kalankita* (defiled). Only a widower or a divorcee with children will be ready to marry her. The dowry custom is also very strong. In lower middle class families, at least Rs 16,000 are spent on a girl's wedding. In rich families, it may be up to a lakh.

Will not your family feel that their izzat, their honour, will suffer if your life story is published?

Why should their honour be affected? Is it not the truth? Today, I have the self confidence to tell the truth. Perhaps some women who read about me may feel that it is possible for them too to change their lives by their own efforts. At least, some unmarried girls may gather the courage to insist that their parents allow them to study further. I think some women may feel inspired by my struggle. That is what I hope.

Have you ever spoken about your life before?

I have spoken at two women's meetings. I heard other women talk about their lives and about women's liberation. I felt that I should also speak

about my struggle. After all, what can my family do to me than they have already done?

Will your family let you take up a job? Is there a possibility your husband may forbid you to take a job?

Well, I used to be very weak before. If anyone spoke harsh me, I would start crying. I cried so much in my life that if tears had been collected, they would have formed a sizeable stream. But now I think that if he tries to stop me from taking a job, he says: "Leave the house if you want to take a job" then I will live separately. I will stay alone. Bi will take a job. I now have self confidence to do that. Perhaps he knows this and that is why he accepts me as I am. □

Anganwadi Workers Struggle For Minimum Wages

ON the afternoon of February 28, hundreds of women *anganwadi* workers set out towards parliament, where the budget session was in progress. In defiance of section 144 which was in force throughout Delhi, the women marched from Jantar Mantar, under the banner of All India Anganwadi Helpers and Workers Union. Outside the parliament street police station, they were arrested by policewomen, and were released that evening after being issued a warning by a magistrate.

These women are employed in a child development project that is jointly run by UNICEF and government of India. The project covers about one lakh *anganwadis* in resettlement colonies and backward areas all over the country. About two lakh women and girls, educated between higher secondary and MA, are employed as social Workers and helpers. They are paid between Rs 50 and Rs 225 a month.

The government tries to justify the

extreme lowness of the wage by saying that the women are serving a good cause hence they should be content with less money which is an honorarium not a wage. Union president Kripa Gautam points out that officials employed in the project, such as supervisors and administrators, are paid on par with central government employees. Why then should women workers be paid an amount that is far less than the government declared minimum wage? This callousness shows how little the government cares for the good cause it professes to serve. The women declare that they have been accepting this absurdly low wage only because they were compelled by circumstances to do so, but they find it difficult to survive on this wage.

The women start work at 8 a.m. and continue till 3 p.m. They have to prepare and distribute nutritious food to the children, keep weight records, give polio, cholera and other inoculations, distribute vitamin pills, conduct

preschool classes, and adult literacy classes, feed and advise pregnant women, teach sewing, knitting and embroidery to women. They also have to maintain attendance registers, look after stores, conduct monthly surveys health and hygiene. Each *anganwadi* caters to a slum population 1,000, and admits 150 children a 60 pregnant women.

The women say that while they may be referred to as social activists in government records, they are treated by officers as wage worker or rather as slaves. Their payment is cut if they take leave or come late, they are issued charge sheets and threatened with dismissal. They are often scolded and insulted by officers. Though the project employs two lakh women, it makes no provision for maternity, casual or special leave. Not a single law laid down by government for labour in private or state organisations is applied to *anganwadi* workers. The supreme court has laid down in one of its judgements that even the priests and servants in temples and *gurudwaras* are entitled to the government ordained minimum wage, so the *anganwadi* union is now thinking of appealing to the supreme court.

— Shaheen

(translated from Hindi)