

PRABHA RANI



## The Tyranny Of Marriage

ON January 28, 1984, Veena Chugh, a 28 year old married woman, reportedly committed suicide by burning herself in the toilet of Gurudwara Rakab Ganj, New Delhi.

Veena may be one of the hundreds in the capital who commit suicide within a year of marriage. The circumstances in which she died reveal the pressures exerted by society on a married woman and the tyrannical proportions a social institution can assume, as in this case, marriage did.

### Beginnings

By all accounts, Veena, one of three sisters and two brothers, was a hardworking, self made girl. After completing her graduation she learnt stenography. Though she started as a salesgirl at a milk booth, by dint of hard work she finally became a personal assistant in the Research and Analysis Wing. Thus she achieved what many yearn for, a government job. She was soon earning Rs 1,300 a month. Then began the search for a "suitable match" for her.

### Social Achievement?

The man chosen to be her life companion was Prem Prakash Dlingra, who is a communication assistant at Palam airport. He is the eldest of seven children - two brothers and four sisters. His father is a peon in Rajkumari Amrit Kaur institute. They got his address

from a marriage bureau. All that Veena's brother and sister's husband could say, when questioned as to the exact occupation of Prem Prakash was that he was a "CA" in the Ministry of Tourism. This appalling ignorance is perhaps an indication that their main concern being to get the girl married, they did not investigate the circumstances of the boy.

They spent nearly Rs 60,000 on her marriage. The dowry included double beds, a dressing table, a wood and dunlop sofa set and a set of gold jewellery. All this Veena's mother gave on her own because the boy's parents said they only wanted the girl,

### Wanted—An Earning Automaton

What they did not mention was that they wanted an earning girl. When I met Dhingra's mother and sister, they declared that they had hoped to better their economic status by bringing an earning member into the house. The mother further said that the salary Veena earned in 10 months would have made the dowry for one of Dhingra's sisters. So Veena was not only expected to fulfil the traditional roles of wife and daughter-in-law but also to earn for the family, and to accumulate enough money for the dowries of her three unmarried sisters-in-law.

Under these circumstances, it goes without saying, her monthly income would have been completely controlled by her in-laws, Veena, in effect, was never needed or loved for herself. What could be more humiliating than the knowledge that the only attraction she held for her husband was the money she was bringing in?

### The Rejection

There is enough evidence to show

that Veena refused to live with this humiliation. Within a fortnight of her marriage, she returned home, complaining of her husband's drunkenness, beatings, parents-in-law's support of him and their demands for more dowry. She also accused her husband of having threatened to poison her. Her brother talked it over with her husband who said he had been joking when he talked of poisoning. He then took Veena back.

Within three weeks, Veena came back again. She was seriously unwell and seemed mentally lost to her surroundings. On the advice of a friendly neighbour, Mr. Baveja, she was taken to a psychiatrist in Sucheta Kripalani hospital. She was given shock treatment and drugs. Within 10 days' stay in the hospital, the doctor and the family thought that Veena had returned to her normal state of mind. The doctor S. C. Mullick's diagnosis is that Veena was suffering from situational schizophrenia, that is, the schizophrenia was brought on by a situation unpalatable to her. Therefore, when taken out of that situation, she was cured. And yet it was she who was given electric shocks and drugs.

By October 1983, Veena had decided to sever all relations with her husband and his family. She wrote a detailed letter, relating the circumstances of her marriage and the maltreatment she had suffered at her in-laws' place to five high officials including two CBI officials, and to the police. She sought their help to recover her belongings from her husband's house, and declared categorically that had she known her husband was a drunkard she would not have married

him. She also stated in the letter that it was difficult for her to live under circumstances where her life was in danger.

### **At Home?**

Having taken the decision, it should not have been very difficult for an economically independent woman to implement it. But that presumes that her family's attitude was congenial. This perhaps was not so. When questioned as to whether Veena would have been sent back had her husband promised to treat her well, Veena's brother and sister's husband emphatically said they would have sent her to "her home." As her brother-in-law put it: "That is why we got her married."

If Veena's husband's home was "her home", it follows that her natal home was no longer hers. Veena could not have got total support from her own family. Her mother, however, protests that she had left it to Veena to decide whether or not she wanted to return to her husband. Veena and her mother had complained to the government antidowry cell, but had received no help whatsoever. (See box)

After Veena's death, her mother and brother have filed a case against Prem Prakash and his parents on the charge of abetment to suicide.

There is a clear conflict between what Veena's brother and brother-in-law said and what her mother had to say with regard to Veena's future. Could it be that they had had differences of opinion on the matter? Apparently, there was no unpleasantness in the house on the day Veena committed suicide. What made her do so then? Can it be that the controversy itself made her feel unwanted? Her mother says Veena was a golden bird which they had allowed to fly away, but she also emphasises that she was not interested in Veena's money. What was Veena running away from? What was she protesting against?

### **Tyranny Of Marriage**

Veena was one of many educated and earning women who commit



suicide soon after they are married. We often tend to think that education and economic independence are solutions to all of women's problems. But this is to underestimate the hold of society, its norms and its institutions on an individual. In our society, marriage remains the ultimate goal for a woman, brought up to perform a biological role

and made to think that her achievements in other fields are peripheral to her performance of this central role. She is expected to feel a sense of achievement only if she can acquire a husband and win his love and approval. Not until these expectations and norms change can we expect the situation to change.

## **Antidowry Or Antiwomen?**

### **An investigation into how the Antidowry Cell and the Directorate of Social Welfare disposed of this case**

The antidowry cell transferred the case to the directorate of social welfare. On December 9, 1983, the directorate wrote a letter to the cell, with copies to Prem Prakash and to the Lajpat Nagar police, saying : "Our thorough investigations... reveal that she, under the influence of her mother, wanted to harass her innocent husband, Prem Prakash Dhingra, for not fulfilling her unreasonable demand. Also, investigations from her hospital have revealed that Veena Dhingra is a patient of schizophrenia, a serious mental illness, and is taking medicine for the same. Thus, all her allegations to the police station, Lajpat Nagar, against her husband for dowry demands are

found to be baseless and false."

When questioned as to the logic of this statement, they say that since there was nothing to prove that Veena was not suffering from mental illness before marriage, and since she did not, according to them look happy in her marriage photographs, she must have had elements of schizophrenia "in her blood" which were precipitated by marriage. This despite the psychiatrist's statement that Veena suffered situational schizophrenia which was cured when she was removed from the situation that had caused it. The social worker from the directorate said that she had met the neighbours of Veena and of Prem

Prakash, and had received good reports of both of them. She, however, chose to disregard the favourable opinion of Veena's neighbours about her, and noted only that Veena's mother was accused by her neighbours of having been instrumental in breaking the marriages of her two other daughters, and of having wanted Veena and Prem Prakash to stay with her. In my investigation, I found no basis for this accusation. The most reliable neighbour, Mr Baveja, who brought the case to us, thinks the allegation is baseless. Even if the mother did want her daughter and son-in-law to stay with her, why should this be construed as any more "unreasonable" than the demand that

a woman stay with her in-laws ?

The directorate's most emphatic argument was that Prem Prakash, when interviewed by them, had declared his willingness to "keep" Veena. Since it was she who did not want to stay with him, they saw it as a case of her trying to "harass" him.

If this is the logic by which the directorate operates then its role and purpose must be seriously questioned. If the officials in the directorate judge women by the most conservative values prevalent in society, and try their utmost to convince a woman that her place is in her husband's house, no matter how she is treated there, then are they very different from the police force who usually connive with those

who perpetuate heinous crimes on women ?

It is of utmost significance that though it was Veena who had sought the help of the antidowry cell to recover her dowry articles and to dissolve her marriage, they did not, after their "investigations", even send her a statement of the conclusions they had reached. Instead, they sent the letter quoted above, titled "Prevention of harassment of Prem Prakash Dhingra" to Prem Prakash. This "official document" thus becomes "evidence" of the "innocence" of Prem Prakash, and will be so used by him when the case of abetment to suicide filed by Veena's brother-in-law finally comes to court.



## The Story Of A Sterilisation Camp

A gross experience I had recently was witnessing a mass sterilisation camp at the local government health centre. Just seeing it affected me strongly, and I still find it hard to think about. The once popular male sterilisation programme seems to have given way to a similar campaign, with targets, incentives, motivators, against women. About 100 women were operated on, by the new superfast method of laproscopy. The women had

to wait hours with empty stomachs, and minds probably full of fear of the unknown. The, only counselling seemed to be : *"Tumko kuchh nahin hoga. Operation ke bad sab kar sakte ho."*

The conditions in the operating room were very primitive, and there was nothing sterile in sight. I was easily admitted into the operating room, along with sundry workers, husbands and so on. I am not very good in such

situations and did not last long before I was at the point of passing out, but I was there long enough to see the process.

A production line—three tables in rotation, women upside down at a 45 degrees angle, abdomens exposed, cut at the navel, something inserted, abdomens blown up with air, various instruments inserted to the fallopian tubes, deflated, stitched up, moved out- all the space of a few minutes.

Luckily the women were under the influence of pethidine, a narcotic pain reliever. The smell of fear was tangible outside, where they were lined up on the floor. Obviously, such violence on a woman's body must have complications—physical or psychological or both.

Women need an alternative to constant pregnancies but is this it? No doubt this suffering is minor compared to the ordeal of child birth. But why should women's suffering be taken for granted? After the sterilisation operation, women are routinely given a supply of antibiotics and painkillers. There is no scheduled follow up, and the women go home within a couple of hours.

There are reports of postoperative complications such as pain and excessive weight gain. A woman I know from an outlying village was operated on. I saw her a week later. She was not able to move about freely, still had swelling and pain and still wore the same strongly adhesive bandage which had not been changed. The wound had not been cleaned at all. She had not been able to go to the clinic, but her husband had been to enquire and had received instructions to apply warm compresses. They had continued the antibiotic capsules from their own money. The routine supply is not sufficient to combat infection or to prevent infection, especially where there is a lack of hygiene.

When I made enquiries at the centre, the nurse in charge could only come up with statements like "They are illiterate. It's all psychological."

Though male sterilisation is a far less complicated operation, men are not willing to take the responsibility, so women who want to stop having constant pregnancies are forced themselves to undergo sterilisation. The miserable Rs 125 incentive given to women is about half what men used to be paid. A friend who spoke with



women in Sri Lanka who had been sterilised reported that many husbands took the sterilisation to be a complete licence for demanding sexual relations at any time, with the deterrent of unwanted pregnancies removed.

There was controversy during and after the emergency about forced sterilisations of men, but will those who protested then care now that it is being forced on women?

—Mangala

## DO YOU KNOW ?

Women in India, who cook food by burning biomass fuels like wood or cowdung, expose themselves to high levels of pollutants, including a deadly chemical, benzoapyrene, which is suspected to cause cancer according to Dr Kirk R. Smith, who is energy programme leader at the Resource Systems Institute at the East-West Centre, Honolulu, Hawaii

Dr Smith, who conducted a study of 36 rural households in India recently, said that, in some cases, levels of the chemical were equivalent to the concentration in the smoking of 20 packets of cigarettes a day. He said that poor ventilation and badly made *chulhas* compound the problem.

Dr Smith's study revealed that women who spent on an average three hours a day in the kitchen were exposed to 700 micrograms particulates per cubic metre as against the acceptable level of 75. Some the tiny particulates get into the lungs without being filtered out in nose, causing serious health problems. **Statistics also show that most the deaths in India among women above the age of five are related to respiratory ailments.**

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