

A mother of two boys was recently killed in our neighbourhood. She somersaulted to the ground from her third floor terrace. She was thirty-eight. She had moved to this flat ten days earlier. How, you might ask, can such an accident take place in the first place? Did the woman jump off the terrace wall? Was the woman deranged, depressed, or plain suicidal? Perhaps she was all of the above in some measure. In fact, would it be wrong to assert that a great many Indian housewives are stressed to the point of mental illness? But my neighbour on that sultry August morning was not contemplating suicide. She was simply throwing out garbage, emptying out her dustbin into an alley where pigs and dogs often rummage through household refuse. She was not aware that the parapet of the terrace was an old crumbling wall, cemented with ordinary clay between the bricks instead of concrete. Remember, she had moved there just recently.

One could easily blame the victim—didn't she know that she shouldn't have leaned over the wall? Or the next-in-line culprit, her landlord, whose duty it was to have repaired the faulty wall. But the story, like all stories, has many stories within it, buried layers of complexity, which make it difficult to judge who the real perpetrators of this crime are.

So where does this woman's story begin? Perhaps we should begin at the very beginning, with her birth. We could call her Mamta. She was the eldest of three daughters of an upper caste, upper class family. Her father is a well-placed pillar of his community, a doctor by profession, but he didn't think it worthwhile to endow his daughters with a sense of independence. When some relative, whose judgement the father trusted,

suggested a suitable match for the attractive and reasonably well-educated Mamta, the father, the patriarch who ruled the family, agreed only too readily. The groom was of the same caste and had a Central Government job. End of investigation. The marriage took place without the groom and the bride meeting even once before the wedding.

Would it come as a surprise to say the marriage was troubled right from the start? Marriages may be made in heaven, but they have to be endured on earth, by ordinary women, with ordinary powers of coping. My neighbour was fortunate enough to find a government job herself, which she couldn't keep for long. Her husband found a better paying job in a small town, and she was forced to give up hers. She refused to move to the small town with him and instead settled with her children in our city where she could send them to better schools. The husband did not deem it necessary to allow her to apply for a job transfer. Because it was her decision to set up a separate household for the sake of the children, he said her primary responsibility was towards her children who would be neglected if she took up full-time employment.

She herself internalised this patriarchal dictum so well, she agreed with her husband that the responsibility for rearing those two children was entirely hers. And she settled into the exhausting and depressing routine of domesticity. She developed the characteristics

typical of the oppressed—doing all the housework, saving on little luxuries so she could prove to her husband the legitimacy of maintaining two households, being obsessive about the academic achievements of her children. In all my conversations with her, the only subject she ever discussed was the education and the future of her sons. In the insane environment of competitions for seats, she was always fretting over whether her sons would make it to a reputable institution of higher education.

The husband would come on weekend visits, which were little more than formal. He spoke very little with her, so great was his resentment that she had decided to set up a separate household and leave him to fend for himself in that small town. He spoke very little with the children, who learned to stay out of his way. Mamta would cook elaborate dishes for him to take back on the bus to spare him the canteen food for a couple of meals. But on some weekends, he did not even make those perfunctory visits. He had grown spiritual and found a guru whose meditation camps he attended in far-flung villages. On those weekends, Mamta waited on the landing, looking lost. There was often no phone call from him to inform her not to expect him that weekend. The children seemed only too relieved to be spared the unease of his sombre presence.

Recently, to save on rent, the husband advised Mamta to move to a cheaper accommodation, and that is how she moved to that flat with the

Pinning Responsibility

Story of a Woman's Unwarranted Death

○ Nighat Gandhi

faulty terrace wall. Mamta's father offered to buy her a flat, but her self-righteous husband refused to accept charity, and there the matter ended.

Death did not come to Mamta fast or easy. It came after tremendous suffering for more than a month as a quadriplegic, at the mercy of an indifferent medical establishment. Even if her nose itched, she had to ask someone to scratch it for her as she had no movement in her limbs from the neck down. Her parents and her husband spared no effort in trying to save her life, but there was very little anybody could do. The fall had broken her vertebrae, damaged her spinal nerves, collapsed her respiration, given her a broken leg, and prolonged immobility produced crater-like bed sores all over her body. Fortunately for her, the loss of sensation meant the messages of pain from her body were not relayed to her brain.

When the family brought her body home, her mother-in-law came and adorned her corpse with a red *bindi*, bright bangles, a shimmering red sari, and sprinkled rose petals and *sindoor* over her, so fortunate was Mamta to have died a *suhagan*, with a husband still alive. Soon after her death, there was talk that the husband's parents would get him remarried, as he had his whole life ahead of him. There was little talk of the boys who had more life ahead of them to live than their father and whose education was the cause for which their mother had martyred herself.

In most societies, the primary responsibility for rearing children rests on mothers, with the father's role limited to providing financial support. How truly enriched our children's lives would be from parenting that is done by mothers and fathers equally.

So we are back to the question of who was really responsible for Mamta's death. I would say it was, to

some extent, her father who got her married without any thought of compatibility between his daughter and her husband, and even when aware of her unhappiness in the marriage, made no attempts at rescuing her, giving over the right to conduct her affairs to her husband. To a great extent it was also her husband who paid no heed to her need for self-fulfillment as an individual, and only acted to exacerbate her guilt for standing up for her beliefs even when she did it for the sake of their children.

But, can we let society and its social institutions in which Mamta lived and died, off the hook? Let's consider the lack of easily available high-quality education, which is a fundamental right of all citizens. If there had been reasonably good schools in the small town where Mamta's husband found a job, she would not have moved to the city, would not have rented cheap unsafe housing to save money, would presumably not have been alone on that fateful morning had her husband been around. In our society most aspiring higher education seekers are not assured of opportunity to pursue their goals without giving sleepless nights to themselves studying like robots, without requiring their middle-class parents to save every penny to finance them. In such a society, students' poison is fast becoming coveted meat for mercenary teachers: coaching centres are flourishing. So are the increasing demands for dowries from parents who have invested in their sons' education; so is violence against women in the form of deaths inflicted by husbands and in-laws for not bringing enough dowry.

What about the role of the landlord in Mamta's death? Soon after the accident, he repaired the broken wall, and issued a statement in the papers to the effect that a woman tenant fell

from the terrace due to an attack of dizziness. He covered his footprints well. In a consumer-conscious society, he would have been behind bars by now. In a society where laws are not just formulated but enforced with equal vigour, he would not have dared to rent out a flat that was unsafe for habitation. But the landlord knows he's beyond the grasp of the law. Mamta's husband is unwilling to take him to court. His logic is, what's done can't be undone, so let murderers commit murders with greater impunity, since the murdered can't be brought back to life. And even if he had decided to press charges, who knows how long the case would have dragged on in our courts whose greatest claim to fame is their tardiness and inefficiency?

The net result of this totally preventable and unnecessary tragedy is that a woman in her prime has died a painful and unwarranted death, two children have been orphaned, and those like that landlord, who have been getting away with murder, can continue to do so, without even the customary exhibition of remorse. We can blame or accept Fate, as Mamta's relatives have done, in order to continue living. We can hope that all is well in this antiquated land of ours where even the trees and monkeys are supposedly endowed with a halo of divinity. Or we can critically re-examine ourselves and our social institutions, and the communities in which we live. We can start according to others, and demanding from them, higher standards of justice, equal opportunity and freedom of choice to all, in all aspects of life. It is the ordinary citizen's resolve for a more humane world, the proverbial drop in the ocean that is ultimately likely to usher in a saner world. It may take time but an ocean is, after all, a sum of all its drops flowing together. □