

Case 2: Vimal's Story

This is the story of a parityakta (woman deserted by her husband) who sought help of Stri Mukti Sangharsh, (SMS) a mass organization of women which has been actively organizing women in drought affected Sangli district, Southern Maharashtra. It brings out the helplessness with which women from upper castes bear humiliation and torture 'for the family honour' and how when they finally decide to break out of their shackles they get trapped in notions of 'appropriate female behaviour and morality'.

The Situation

Vimal, belongs to the Maratha caste, a dominant, upper caste. The family consisted of Vimal's older married sister, Vimal herself and a younger married brother and both her parents. Being a toiling peasant family entirely dependent on rain-fed agriculture, their economic condition was often precarious. Vimal was married at a young age, into a relatively well-to-do family in the irrigated belt of this district. The dowry that was given fell 14 rupees short of the promised and agreed upon amount. Her in-laws saw this as deliberate humiliation and after taking her home inflicted untold physical and mental torture on her. Her husband regularly whipped her when he felt she was not toiling enough in the fields or that her expressions and behaviour were not sufficiently submissive. She was not allowed to cohabit with her husband and when even two years after marriage could not give the expected 'good news' of pregnancy, was labeled as being 'barren'.

Her husband subsequently remarried for the sake of perpetuating the family lineage. Vimal decided that it would be in her interest to accept the co-wife as her younger sister and won her over with her warmth and caring nature and the fact that she never let the second wife get burdened with the household and farm work responsibilities. Vimal subsequently recalled her naivety, as she genuinely believed that despite the mental torture she was experiencing when she saw the co-wife enjoying all the privileges which were rightly hers', she never protested, as she thought her 'good behaviour' would eventually draw her husband's sympathy and affection towards her. But this was not to be...

When the co-wife conceived, Vimal rejoiced with all others in the family and nurtured her through her pregnancy and was gratified that her 'younger sister' was 'nice' to her. A male child was born immediately elevating the co-wife's status. When Vimal, unconditionally tried to shower maternal love on the baby however, people in the village and her in-laws started warning the co-wife of the inherent danger of the 'evil eye' of this 'barren' woman. The co-wife succumbed to these suggestions and began to show her resentment through openly rude behaviour and insults heaped on Vimal. This was the last straw for Vimal and the pent-up emotions and frustrations of several years surfaced and Vimal began to have major fights with the co-wife. Fed-up with this her husband decided to eliminate the inconvenience of having Vimal around and tried to kill her with a sickle when she went to work in their sugarcane fields. Sensing the danger to her life, Vimal

finally broke free, seven years after her marriage, and with support from her sister and brother-in-law came back to live with her parents.

Once back in the village she was the target of censure and ridicule, both for her single status as well as the inauspiciousness of being barren. A childhood friend from her own caste seemed to be the only one who sympathized with her plight and Vimal gradually developed a clandestine intimacy with him when he promised to pull her out of her situation by marrying her. When she conceived, she shared this with him in the hope that with his understanding she could get back her social status which she had lost due to no fault of hers. He however went back on his commitment and quickly went in for an arranged marriage, leaving Vimal with no choice but to go through a secret abortion, which used to be talked about in conspiratorial whispers in the village.

Subsequently Vimal took the help of SMS to file for and win a maintenance suit. Her husband's family came back, more than 5 years after she'd escaped, saying they were willing to forget and forgive, if she was ready to get back to them on their terms. The village elders and her parents also felt that this would be better for her as her brother had already started resenting her uncalled for 'boldness' and her aging parents were anxious as to what she'd have to go through once they were gone. Vimal however feared for her personal security in her marital village. The years of struggle and betrayal had also strengthened her resolve to fight the system on her own terms. She therefore resisted these pressures, staked her claim to a share of her parents' property and decided to move on, on her own, despite the rejection and isolation she knew she would have to face. SMS stood by her.

Incidentally, in the same village, when K., a Maratha male, who was married with growing children entered into an illicit relationship with a widow and subsequently her two daughters, when they grew into adolescents, beyond mirthful gossip, he faced none of the social censure and immoral labeling Vimal had to undergo.

The Concerns

The organization, while dealing with Vimal's case, had to stand up to much criticism, particularly from the upper caste men and women, for encouraging Vimal in her bold stand and felt that by not motivating Vimal to 'adjust' the activists had contributed to her social ostracism. When the double standards in social attitudes towards Vimal and K were pointed by women activists they responded by saying that 'stri-mukti' should not lead to promiscuity amongst women while K was 'after all helping a widow and her daughters to subsist'. The entire cycle of exploitation and oppression was nowhere willing to be conceded. The women also felt that Vimal, as a woman, had over-stepped her limits and caused much embarrassment to her family and the onus of resisting male advances (as a 'natural male trait') rests on the self-control of women.

Questions for Discussion

- 1) What is your position on the assertion of self-identity and the right to make a sexual choice that Vimal chose to exercise? What is your opinion about the supportive role played by SMS activists? Explain your position.
- 2) How would you analyze the social positions taken with respect to male and female sexuality? Do you believe this is justified? Argue your positions.
- 3) How do you look at the triple hierarchies of class, caste and patriarchy in the case of *parityaktas*?
- 4) What do you think should be the strategies and the institutional mechanisms built to women such as Vimal?
- 5) Are you aware of such incidents in your socio-cultural and regional contexts?