

NITA sat down at her desk and began looking through the data sheets. "After this urban survey, I'd like to find out more about the rural household situation", she decided, "Dr Palekar was saying he needed an assistant, preferably female." She felt really happy. Her eyes fell on the envelope below the file. A letter from Jiten again! She bit her lip and put the envelope into her diary. What could Jiten be thinking of now? His letters since she had left him were full of threats—the threat of divorce, of breaking the news to her parents, of sending letters to Dr Palekar, Dr Mehta and the other higher-ups at the institute. What now? Why couldn't he leave her alone?

"Hi there", chimed Doshi. Nita looked up. "Another love letter, eh? Nita, why don't you take a holiday and go meet your poor husband? Letter after letter! You take your work too seriously, baby! The poor man must be all ready and waiting for you on a bed of roses. Think it over, dear." Doshi moved away.

Nita felt like screaming out loud. Even if Jiten did leave her alone, there was Doshi, Vikas, Dr. Palekar... When had they ever left her alone? They were all researchers! Respectable! They would forget all about their research in a split second if only they were given a chance to chew on the sex lives of the separated women in this wretched institute. She felt like walking out of the place. She had often been on the verge of walking out but Alok had always stopped her: "If you leave, there will be some other woman. These men will try to get at her even more, since they'll have got away with it once. Don't give up, Nita. Let's face it together. We're working together. These guys are completely incidental to our research." He had always stood by her when the big guys had tried to bully her, or, worse still, ignore her.

Alok was out of station. Nita was in the van going to the fieldwork village, Kodol. With her were Dr Palekar, and Aditi who was very new to the institute. Nita was happy to have another woman with her. She looked out of the window, trying to ignore Dr Palekar's stare. She often wondered how it was that she managed to get over her despondency so quickly.

The Red Letter Day

But what would happen if this went on and on? Either she would become utterly insensitive or she would blow up the bloody institute. Dynamite it! She could imagine how Dr Palekar with his big paunch would try hopelessly to run out, how the timid mouse within Doahi would attempt to sneak out, oblivious to the cast away tiger skin beside him, how Dr Mehta would forget his cultivated and false sophistication, how Vikas and his lot would curse her with their foulest curses before they breathed their last. Nita could not help laughing. Dr Palekar looked up, irritated.

"What are you so amused about, Nita?" he asked, displaying his utterly revolting smile. They were nearing Kodol. "There seems to be a fair on here", Dr Palekar was telling Hasmukh, the driver, "I wonder how much work can be done here." Nita shut her eyes but she was awakened with a jolt. The van had braked suddenly and violently. A crowd had surrounded the van. Nita and Aditi clasped each others' hands for support...

Nita's days were hectic now. She was trying to keep the horrid incident at Kodol out of her mind. Alok and she had to complete the report in a fortnight. They had worked day and night on the material, comparing notes, discussing and writing the final version. She had never imagined she could work so hard without feeling exhausted. In fact she

was feeling more enthused as the time for the final submission and seminar approached.

Yet in a way she dreaded the prospect of facing the world and herself once the project was over. What after this fortnight? Her work had given her the moral strength to resist Jiten and break away from the dreadful past of non-existence. What was she to do after this project? Apply for another? At the same institute? Doshi's treacherous look flashed into her mind, Palekar's stupid, shallow, know-all expression, and Mehta's sophisticated gimmicks. She remembered her last struggle against Dr Mehta. He had used her research findings without so much, as acknowledging her name, her work. Alok and she had openly confronted him, though the threat of being thrown out hung above their heads. She desperately needed the job because both she and her sister Swati were dependent on it for a livelihood.

Alok found her with her head resting on the table. "Depressed again? Tired? What's the matter?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing. Did you finish the review of the literature?" Nita asked, trying to sound lighthearted.

"Nearly. What have you been doing?"

"I've been working on the questionnaire and interviews. Maybe we'll finish by this weekend. What do

you say?"

"Looks like. Nita, why don't we go for a holiday after the seminar is over? We really deserve it, don't we?"

"What? We...on a holiday?"

"Why not? I'm not trying to suggest anything. I'm sure you know that. We can go with some others, Swati perhaps."

"OK, we'll see about it after all this *zamela* is over. I am a bit nervous about the seminar."

"Why, Nita? There's nothing to be nervous about. None of them knows even the ABC of this topic." Alok looked at her more closely. "Nita, what's wrong? You've been looking lost and nervous for more than a week now. What are you trying to hide from me, Nita? Did any of these guys try their humour on you?"

"No, no, no, Alok, you're imagining. It's the exhaustion, I think. Come, let's finish off as much as we can today."

Nita held the 400 page typed report. She traced the title and the authors' names with her finger. Her body shook with the excitement of finally holding it in her hands—the outcome of the year's hard work done by the two of them. Dr Mehta had assured them that their terms would continue. Alok had decided to continue but Nita had yet to make up her mind. Alok and she had made a good team. The work was interesting. He was quite considerate regarding her depression, her problems with Jiten. She thought she too understood him.

Yet...there were differences too, and somehow, though Nita was usually quite articulate, she could never stick to her point and persuade Alok to see it. Alok was a *man* of initiative, and despite their hectic discussions, their ideas of non-hierarchical decision making, it was somehow always Alok's point of view that found its way into the research rather than Nita's.

This had always worried Nita. Alok was very understanding, he would have listened to her if she had insisted on explaining to him. Why had she not tried? Was it because she had learnt to desire domination, during the years of living with Jiten? She had taken a bold step and walked out of the house. But in these

institutes, was not her life again being controlled by men, seemingly with her consent, sometimes despite her fierce opposition?

"Anyway, I can go on brooding indefinitely. I have to make up my mind. Tomorrow is the seminar and we will have to discuss our future plans. Alok's already begun work on another project proposal. Should I join in with him? Oh no, I can't! What do I want? Should I just prepare for the seminar and let things take their own course? Or maybe I could dynamite..." Despite her depression, Nita couldn't help laughing.

"What's amusing you?" Alok came over to her desk.



"You know, I'm fascinated by a strange idea. I keep dreaming of dynamiting the institute. Wouldn't it be a sight—all these doctorates running for their creepy lives!"

Alok smiled. "You seem terribly angry with these guys again. It's natural. They've given you quite a rough time here."

"It was just a joke."

"Every joke has a basis. You never joke about women, do you?"

"No, I don't, nor will I tolerate anyone doing it." Nita was getting agitated.

"Nita, please tell me what's happened, for heaven's sake..." Alok was pleading. After a silence, she mustered up her courage.

"I had decided not to tell you anything till at least the seminar was over. But now...I must tell you. Remember, three weeks ago, when you were out of

town, Aditi and I had gone to Kodol village with Dr Palekar? Oh actually, I just want to forget it. It comes to me so forcefully how vulnerable, powerless I am..."

"What happened at Kodol, Nita? Tell me", Alok was urging.

"You see, near Kodol, there was an accident. A young boy was hurt. He was all right. Minor bruises. But the villagers were furious. They surrounded the van. All men, angry men, their eyes spitting fire. They pulled Hasmukh out of the van and began beating him up. Hasmukh was dead white. He looked at Palekar, begging him to intervene. But Palekar just sat tight, sobbing away. Aditi and I got down, and tried to apologize, but the crowd would not listen. They wanted to lodge a police complaint. Hasmukh was begging them to settle it. They demanded Rs 2,000. At last Palekar found his voice. Sitting inside the van, he muttered that he would give them the money but he didn't have all of it on him. The crowd was getting more confident. They had sized up their prey. One burly fellow was particularly interested in intimidating Aditi and me. Palekar had only Rs 1,100, but he struck upon an ingenious scheme. He pointed vaguely at Aditi and me, and told the crowd that they would keep us while he went back to the institute with Hasmukh and got the rest of the money."

Alok was stunned. "What a creep! The swine!"

"Listen! I was dazed. So was Aditi. I couldn't think for several seconds and they seemed like hours, but my instincts got the better of me. I held Palekar tight and told him that whatever happened, we were not going to let him go. Just then, an old man intervened, cursed us, took the money, and sent us packing. And Palekar wailed all the way to the institute that because of the 'silly accident' no work had gotten done."

"And...and no one in the institute knows about this? No one took Palekar to task?"

"Everyone talks about it in hush-hush tones. Hasmukh must have been warned, but he couldn't keep it to himself."

"And Aditi?"

“She was shocked and scared. She says we should gauge others’ opinions before exposing the matter. And you know what the opinions will be. She’s scared that we’ll be totally isolated.”

“I hadn’t a clue of this. Why didn’t you tell me, Nita?” Alok spoke in a subdued tone. “You think I’m one of them, don’t you?”

“It’s not that, Alok. If I had told you three weeks ago, we’d have got so worked up that we could not have finished the project report on time.”

“Blast the project and the report.”

“Please, Alok, please don’t be so impatient. We will definitely thrash it out after the seminar.”

Alok was not to be calmed. “What’s wrong with you, Nita? Is this blasted research all that important? This Palekar bloke reads the newspaper every day. L...L...”

Nita stood calmly beside him. “I agree with you. Anything could have happened.”

“I hope, Nita, you don’t think I’m one of them.”

“Of course not. You’re so different, Alok. Completely different from them. Please don’t misunderstand me.”

“Nita, how did you take this... Palekar episode so calmly?”

“I didn’t take it calmly. I was seething with fury. In fact, I typed out a scathing resignation letter—a history of the institute’s treatment of women. But then I thought, what after this institute? Where to?”



Nita entered the seminar room. About 20 men were already seated there. Alok was at the table, looking despondent. But Nita felt excited, confident. She crossed the room and sat down next to Alok. One of the men congratulated Alok on the report. “Good analysis. You seem to have taken real pains over it.” Nita was elated. Acclaim from such academically prestigious people! She had never had this experience before! She sat there as if in a dream. Their hard work over the year seemed to have borne fruit. “You should think about publishing it”, someone suggested. Alok brightened up.

Dr Mehta and Dr Palekar entered the

room. The seminar began. As usual, Alok briefly presented the main points of the report and Nita summarized the findings. There was a brief silence. Dr Palekar cleared his throat. “Any questions or comments?” He flashed his smile.

Dr Roy began. “I appreciate your work very much, but I have a few suggestions. I felt the data base was a bit weak—” Nita began to take notes of the comments. She hated this work, but as luck would have it, she was very good at it. She was quick enough to take down every word that was being said. Now it was Palekar. His smile. “I too have a few suggestions to make.” She continued her steno work. Suddenly she had a queer feeling. Dr Roy, Palekar, in fact all of them, were looking straight at Alok, addressing him. Once in a while, someone would glance at her, but they were oblivious of her existence as an equal colleague of Alok. She felt uneasy, Should she stop taking notes? Or should she concentrate all her attention only on her notes, and forget the rest?

Dr Palekar continued: “I would like once again to emphasize that he has worked really hard on the report, he has taken great pains and has come out with some really significant results, which should be investigated and substantiated more thoroughly. His basic premises...”

Nita felt faint. She looked at Alok. His face was bright. He was smiling contentedly. Her throat went dry. She glanced at her notes again. “Now, would you like to answer the questions that have been raised?” Dr Mehta asked Alok, incidentally giving her a smile. Alok whispered to Nita: “I’ll deal with the questions regarding the first section. You go ahead with the rest, OK?” and he began.

“Want to add anything substantial?” he asked her when he had finished. “No, I don’t want to”, she answered abruptly. Alok seemed startled. “What’s the matter, Nita?” he whispered. “Nothing.” Another abrupt answer. The seminar went on for an hour but she had switched off. When it ended, Alok avoided her eye. He was deep in discussion with someone, but looked ill at ease. Nita walked out of

the room.

Trying to fight back her tears, she looked around. Not a soul in sight. She hurried towards the hostel. As she neared the end of the long road, tears began to slip down her cheeks. She rushed to her room and crashed down on the bed.

The scenes of the afternoon passed through her mind. “How could Alok? Maybe he didn’t realize, or maybe I misunderstood?” She wanted to console herself, she knew exactly what had happened. “How could Alok let himself be used against me? How could he play into their hands? There must be some other reason. Some explanation. What should be done? They should be confronted. Who will do it? I? They’ll dismiss it as the fantasy of an insecure, hysterical female. Maybe Alok could confront them. But how? They’ll deny it or say it was a slip of the tongue. We should have done it right there. Now is it too late?” She fell asleep, still wondering.

Next morning. Should she drop in at Alok’s place? Or wait for him to come over? Yesterday had been a memorable day. Carved in golden letters! Today would be another one. Their future plans! Alok had prepared the next research proposal. She had gone through it and made suggestions. They were supposed to discuss it with Palekar today.

Yesterday, Nita had wanted to fling the project, the institute, and get out. Maybe go back to Jiten for some time.

Today, she thought differently. “If I leave this place I’ll be haunted by the memory of these systematic attempts to destroy me. I am sick of fighting my battles through someone or other. That is over now. Neither Alok nor I will have that illusion again. I will have to fight my battles myself—here, in this institute. Not by fitting myself into an already designed project, but by chalking out a project for myself. I will do it.”

Nita picked up her bag and walked towards the institute. □

As They Say

“If a man makes a stupid mistake, men say: ‘What a fool that man is.’ If a woman makes a stupid mistake, men say: ‘What fools women are.’”