

SHE DIED ALONE

—The Story to Tai

NOVEMBER 29, 1979, Morning. I picked up the Marathi newspaper and immediately saw the news items: “Pregnant young woman died on threshold of unfaithful lover’s house”. I ran my eyes down the column: “In Gorangana, a village 20 kilometres away from here, a young unmarried woman died in childbirth on the open verandah of a young man’s house. The police have sent the body to Wardha for post mortem and her child has been sent to the Nagpur orphanage. It is reported that the 16 year-old woman Tai Kavadu Giri has a year-long relationship with 27 year old Shivshankar Jalgaonkar of the same village. He brought her to his house to help his sister-in-law during her confinement. While living at his house, she became pregnant. There upon Shivshankar sent her home and repeatedly pressured her to get the child aborted. On October 1, 1979, in the presence of the village *sarpanch*, the police *patel* and many other villagers, Shivshankar promised to marry the girl. However, he did not fulfill this promise, due to family opposition and desire for dowry. He left the village before the woman’s death. The villagers allege that the police are delaying the investigation. The *sarpanch*, Shri Shankar Puri, Vamanrao Vaghmare, the young woman’s father, Kavadu Giri and others intend to go on hunger strike to protest against the injustice done to the woman.”

I could hardly take this in. I read it carefully through again. How do I usually react to such news items? With sadness, deep sadness. And burning anger. Then I cut out the piece and paste it in an album. I regularly prepare small albums of such clippings and present them to my friend - it’s one way of diffusing my discontent and communicating it to others. But now that

I have started reading **Manushi**, I felt this was a very inadequate response. The thought came to my mind: “If I don’t try to find out the painful reality behind these news items, am I not confining my awareness, my anger, within narrow limits? Should I not go beyond a purely emotional reaction? Is it enough that my mind is seething with discontent against all the perverted forms of the man-woman relationship? That I am committed to this discontent, determined to maintain my



A childhood photograph of
Tai and her sister

own integrity?” Of late, I have been constantly asking myself these questions. And when I read this report, suddenly these questions loomed up so large in my mind that I immediately decided to go to the place where the woman had died.

My mother was rather perturbed: “You have never been out like this before. We will be very worried. We’ll be waiting for you. Come back soon.” I

quietly got ready and left. As I reached the bus stop, I met two friends of mine – a man and a woman. When I told them the story, Srikant volunteered to take leave from his office and accompany me.

Gorangana village is also in Wardha district where I live, but for a middle class girl like me, even such an attempt to challenge my protected existence is a very new thing. It is unheard of for a girl like me to go out to such a small village. And so that place, the road leading to it, were as unknown, as mysterious as the highway leading to the city is to a small child who has never been out of the village.

When we alighted at Gorangana bus stand, Srikant had a cigarette and a cup of tea while I chatted with the restaurant owner and found out the address of Kavadu Giri. Well, even Srikant’s silent presence did help me – I was able to make enquiries without attracting too much attention! we walked down a deserted street and reached the cluster of huts built on land given by the government. We located Kavadu Giri’s house. He came out – a man about 40 years of age. I was surprised by his readiness to talk. He wanted to call the *sarpanch* but I told him I could rather talk to him alone.

As we talked, a few facts emerged. Kavadu is a Gond and makes his living by dancing and asking for alms. His wife Parvatibai works as a labourer. Besides Tai, the couple have two other children – an 11-year-old daughter and a five-year old son. When Tai was a child, Kavadu used to live in a tiny village where the nearest school was a mile away so he did not send Tai to school. She was completely illiterate.

Kavadu is a Goswami and Shivshankar a Jangam but both castes mix freely in the village. The two families were involved in the village *Bhajan mandali* and it was through the social life around the temple that Shivshankar and Tai came to know each other. Shivshankar is a failed matriculate. He sold *gur* at the weekly market and did odd jobs now and then. He lived with

his mother, older brother, sister-in-law and their three children. The two families became so close that when Shivshankar's sister-in-law was to have a baby and there was no one to help her, Tai was asked to go and help out. She stayed at Shivshankar's house for two months.

A few days after she returned home, her parents realized that she was pregnant. Shivshankar readily acknowledged that he was the father of the unborn child. Kavadu was reassured but he kept insisting on an early marriage. Shivshankar said this might take some time as his elder brother would oppose the marriage. Kavadu agreed to wait. And Shivshankar repeatedly urged Tai to have an abortion.

Shivshankar was too afraid to directly approach his brother Malikarjun. He hoped that the brother would hear of the affair and get the two married to save the family reputation. Seeing this, Tai's father decided to get Shivshankar to make a public declaration of his intentions so that he would not be able to back out later. This was easy because Kavadu's brother Shankar is the village *sarpanch*. On October 1, Shivshankar, in the presence of many villagers, acknowledged his relationship with Tai and promised to marry her. But on the fifth, he ran away from the village. He stayed for some days in Wardha city and is now living in Pathurna village of Nagpur district.

On October 22, Tai left her father's house and went to Shivshankar's house. On the 23rd, Malikarjun hastily sent his wife and the kids away to her brother. He then locked up the house and took his mother to live in another house. From the 23rd, Tai lived alone on the verandah of the deserted house. Her father sent her food every day. Tai's child was expected in the last week of November. During this one month, Kavadu and others filed complaints with the village panchayat of Morangana, the police station at Kharangana, the *panchayat samiti*, the DSP and DIG of police station, Wardha, and the police station, Pathurna. They demanded that Shivshankar be

ordered to return to the village.

Tai's labour pains began unexpectedly on the evening of November 21. At midnight, the government hospital nurse examined her and said the child would be born only after a week or so. She also said the case was normal and there was no cause for



Shobhna

worry. The next night, the pains started again and about 3 a.m., the child was born. Tai lay unconscious and was bleeding profusely so the doctor was called. Until then, Tai had been given only a cup of hot tea to drink. The government hospital doctor came and declared the case "hopeless". A few moments more, Tai cried weakly: "Ai..." (mother) and then fell silent – for ever.

Kavadu kept speaking: "We want justice. My daughter is dead but we will not forgive Shivshankar. The police are absolutely indifferent to our pleas. But most of the villagers are on our side." I interrupted: "Why do you think Malikarjun opposed the marriage?"

Kavadu replied: "Malikarjun had refused many offers that came for Shivshankar. Once Rs. 1,500 were offered as dowry but Malikarjun demanded Rs. 4,000 and said that 1,500 would not even cover the cost of incense sticks! It was he who forced Shivshankar to run away. Before going, Shivshankar had told Tai that Malikarjun was threatening to kill him so he had to leave but she should

go and live in his house so that his family would be forced to accept her and call him back."

I listened to Kavadu but no clear picture of Tai emerged in my mind. I wanted to feel, to experience her. I asked for her photograph. Kavadu brought out one that had been taken seven years before. I dusted it with my handkerchief and now I could see Tai.

While I was talking to Kavadu, several village women had gathered around us and stood listening to our conversation. Tai's mother and sister did not seem at all disturbed. They giggled with the other women when I asked about the physical relationship between Tai and Shivshankar. As for Kavadu, he related the whole story as clinically as if he was describing some everyday village occurrence. The whole story sounded well-rehearsed and recited – an emotionless commentary. I wondered if he had an eye on Malikarjun's property and therefore was wanting to fight the case now whereas he had not offered his daughter any support when she needed it.

When I spoke to the women, one said: "Well, it was the girl's fault. Everything should be done at the proper time. She should not have done what she did before marriage. She did it so she had to suffer." I could hardly contain myself and said: "But after all, both of them participated equally in the relationship. The girl's only fault was that she trusted the boy, thought he would marry her. If one person honestly trusts another and is betrayed, how can the one who trusts be blamed?" "But for women it's different. She shouldn't have been misled..."

I looked at the verandah where Tai had fought her lonely battle against tradition. I knocked at the door. Shivshankar's mother emerged. After talking for a few minutes, she suddenly began to act in a strange manner. A crowd had collected outside and they began to shout: "Leave her alone. She is mad. Don't trouble her." It was clear that they were Malikarjun's supporters. We left.

It was market day and Malikaarjun had gone to sell *gur*. After searching for about half an hour we located him. And there were the same two or three vocal young men from the crowd sitting outside his shop and jeeringly awaiting our arrival! Malikaarjun was busy selling *gur* and signed to the young men to talk to us. The young men were only too willing : “Poor Malikaarjun! He is really upset by his whole affair. Today is the first day that he has come home and unlocked the place. He is a poor man – that is why the majority caste in our village is bent upon harassing him. Kavadu’s brother is the *sarpanch* and most of the villagers belong to their caste. So they are able to do what they like!” We indicated that we would rather wait and talk to Malikaarjun.

Malikaarjun remained busy for another half an hour or so. He seemed better dressed and better-off than Kavadu. He began: “We just don’t know what to do. These people are harassing us too much. Our whole family has been scattered because of them.”

“But why did Shivshankar run away?” I asked. “Do you know where he is?”

“Do I know? Of course I do. I sent him”. At this point the young men tried to create a racket and drown his words. Malikaarjun recollected himself and said: “What else could the poor fellow do? He had got a job there. He was searching for a job and by chance he got it at the same time as all this was going on.”

In answer to my questioning he said: “Shivshankar did not do anything. Tai never came to our house. We only knew her family through the *bhajan mandali*. That day when her mother suddenly came to our house, weeping and beating her breast, we could not understand what all the fuss was about. She caught my hand and cried. ‘How did this happen?’ I couldn’t understand her till she said, ‘Our Tai is expecting.’ And then on October 1, Kavadu and others came along, created an uproar and dragged Shivshankar out of our house.

Afterwards we learnt that they had extracted from him a promise to marry

Tai. When such a plot was being laid against him, what could he do except run away?”

“Then how do you explain Tai’s pregnancy?”

“Well for some days she worked on a dam construction site outside the village and then she was also employed by another man. She had relations with several men. Her character was not good.”

I was furious and could hardly control myself. But I kept myself calm, I had to get the whole picture across to you all. “Then why did you leave your house.?” I asked.

“These people were determined to foist the responsibility for the unborn child onto us.”

“But didn’t you and the other people in the colony feel bad to leave Tai alone in such a condition?”

He answered : “What else could be done?”

The young men were quick to join in: “Sister, if anyone killed her, it was her own father. She lived on that verandah for a whole month, exposed to the cold and rain. Poor thing, she was alone all day and night. She was very unhappy. She had not gone there of her own will. People heard her speak, ‘I don’t want to stay here. Please, please take me home.’ She used to keep saying this. And on the day the child was born too, she kept screaming in pain, ‘Baba (father), take me to hospital!’ Even in that condition, she had no sheet spread under her, no

cloth to cover her. This exposure was the only cause of her death, sister!”. Another chimed in: “Otherwise why would the nurse have said that the case was perfectly normal?”

Tai is dead. Men, in their various roles from lover to father, are responsible for her death. And the village women have not raised their voice against this injustice. They do not seem to be moved by it. All of them in their own families meekly obey their husbands and fathers. Just as Shivshankar feared and obeyed his elder brother.

The patriarchal family is based on fear. But this fear is given the name of “respect for elders” and “obedience to parents.” Our society wrongly insists that “As age increases, wisdom also automatically increases.” This is one of the methods used to stop us from thinking for ourselves, to hinder our development. The patriarchal family confines women. And if a woman dares step out of these confines, if she is neither in a father’s not a husband’s family control, then she has no place in our patriarchal society.

Tai died alone. When will women like her, like us, be able to live freely, independently?

When Srikant and I went home, we both felt strongly on one point – we hope that many others who wish to see and know reality, will read about our experience and will also conduct similar investigations when such atrocities take place in their vicinity. And that we will all begin to share this reality with each other

(translated from Hindi) □