

WOMEN SPEAK OUT

AS WE approached the village ten miles away from Bangalore city, we could hear the sounds of celebration. The idol of the goddess Yellumuniamma, was bathed in milk and ghee and dressed in a new silk sari. As the rituals continued, we went to meet and talk with some of the village women.

What is the point of living ?

Bhagya, 37 years old, lives with a wayward husband and six ever-hungry children in a one-room hut whose thatched roof leaks.

“What is the point of living ?” Bhagya asks, holding her howling son away from her empty breast. “Will you believe it, I was once considered a beautiful girl ? Look at me now – ugly,



Jayamma and her daughter

tired, sick. I don't have the will to live. We needed money when our third daughter developed polio so we had to mortgage our only acre of land to the landlord.”

“Is there a good doctor nearby ?”

“The nearest doctors are all private practitioners. Their charges are high. We cannot afford them too often. Government hospitals are too far away and rarely do they even look at us when we go there. But then we have made some special offerings and pilgrimages to many temples. Something good will happen. All this costs money.”

“My husband occasionally gets work in the landlord's fields. Of course, I don't get much from what he earns. He

Photographs taken by J.S.Issac.

drinks most of it away. I also work, whenever work is available. Perhaps you know that I get only Rs. 3.50 a day while my husband gets Rs. 4.80. Even that much helps.” She moves away to stop her children squabbling.

“Do you think things can improve?”

“What is to be said ? This is our fate.”

I hated him...

Jayamma, 23, lives with her husband and his first wife “My story begins six years ago. I came to this house on my sister's request to help her during her fourth confinement. To begin with, my brother-in-law refused to let me return home to my village. My sister saw his growing interest in me and showed her anger so he asked me to leave. Overjoyed that I was going home, I put my few belongings in a bag and went with him. On our way home, he took me to a temple bribed the *pujari* and forcibly married me.”

“What do you feel about him now ?”

“I hated him to begin with. I never reciprocated his advances. But now I feel, what is the use of hating him ? It won't help me. Maybe he will throw me out when he has finished with me. My sister has stopped talking to me and has threatened to kill my daughter.”

My life – nothing to speak of

“Come in.” Meher welcomes us with her lovely smile. “My life has become such a dull routine that company is always welcome. What can I say of my life ? There is nothing to speak about. I am not allowed to go out and work. I am not even allowed to talk to the women around or make friends with them. My husband has told me to forget about my family. He says they are no longer mine. We have been married for a year but not once has he taken me to visit them. He tells me that I am a new person now. What kind of new person ? You tell me, what is so new about struggling from morning to night ?”

“Have you always lived here?”

“No, I grew up in Mysore city and

then suddenly had to shift to this village because my husband works in a factory here.”

“What does he do ?”

“He is a fitter and his salary is very low.”

“Tell us about your daily routine.”

“I have to get up before dawn so that I can defecate in the fields before people start moving around. Then, I have to reserve my place in the long queue for water. After that, I prepare lunch for my husband to take to work with him. The whole day I am alone. I feel very lonely and he comes home late at night because he works overtime to earn a few extra rupees. I can't even sleep at night because I feel so afraid when the men around our house get drunk and start fighting.”



Bhagya with her sixth child

As Indian women, we bear the brunt of India's unsure and shaky economy. We are worst affected when prices rise, when essential commodities are unavailable, when foodstuffs are adulterated. We have no human rights, no civil liberties. We are jailed and tortured inside our own homes. Yet the destiny of India lies with us, with our struggle for change, for a just society.

-Aruna Gnanadason