



Twenty Or Twenty Five

‘FOR Heaven’s sake, Bhagwati, must you go around looking so miserable ? So what if you’ve lost one house ? You’ll soon find another !’

‘It’s not so easy. It’ll take at least 15 to 20 days, even a month. How will I manage till then?’ Bhagwati answered, dejection writ large on her face, tears filling her eyes.

How strangely attached Minna is to this Bhagwati ! If Bhagwati seems even slightly depressed, Minna grows restless, almost begins to blame herself. She may even end up scolding Bhagwati: ‘Why should you make yourself miserable over that good for nothing fellow ? It’s not as if he’s of any use to you. You’re earning your own living. So why don’t you just forget about him, and stay happy ?’

Sermons of this kind make Bhagwati smile. Sadly. What can she say ? She, whose husband has never contributed a paisa to running the house, nor spoken a decent word to her in ten years of married life. Sure, he forces a child on her every year or two. And also gives her a thrashing every second day. As for her mother-in-law and sister-in-law, they turn away their faces, like Babu’s monkeys who have sworn to see no evil and hear no evil. But if Bhagwati ever dares say a word in reply to her husband’s ravings, they hear her fast enough. Both of them pounce on her ‘You shameless hussy— talking back to your husband!’

Perhaps Bhagwati would put up with all this, but there is one insult which makes

her blood boil. On the one hand, this man keeps giving her one child after another, climbs on to her whenever he feels like it, beats and kicks her when she resists, yet on the other hand, he has a mistress too. Sometimes he disappears for a night, sometimes for a whole week. That’s where all his earnings go. Of course, when he has thrown away his own earnings on drink, he can always beat up Bhagwati and snatch the little money she has, to give to that other woman.

If one advises such an illstarred woman to stay happy, will it not seem as if one must be joking ? So Bhagwati smiles. The smile seems to say : ‘Happiness is for *bibis* like you, who have every comfort, whose husbands come and hand over their salaries to you, and never say a harsh word. Where can women like me find happiness ?’

Her sad smile hurts Minna like a taunt. Whenever Bhagwati comes to work with a bruised body and swollen eyes, Minna starts tingling with anger, and bursts out: ‘Why can’t you leave that good for nothing wretch ? After all, you earn enough to feed yourself, don’t you ?’ ‘Maybe I can wash dishes and earn enough to feed the children, but where will I stay ? Rent for the smallest of ‘huts is a 100 rupees. How can I pay Rs 100 for a hut out of a total of 150 ? In any case our *biradari* people will make my life even more of a hell if I start living alone. Women can’t do such things in our community.’

Minna and Bhagwati have repeated this conversation dozens of times. It is Bhagwati who gets beaten up, but it is Minna who flies into a rage. Sometimes she feels exasperated with Bhagwati. Why must she look so forlorn and dejected? Why doesn’t she feel any anger? There she is, working away, dejected, mechanical. And she will do much work as you ask her to. She just doesn’t know how to say ‘No’. That’s why the *bibis* in all the five houses where she works are in a constant state of mingled annoyance and affection. Once she goes into a house to work, there is no knowing when she will emerge and proceed to the next house.

But perhaps Bhagwati has a special fondness for Minna. And why does Minna get so perturbed when she sees Bhagwati depressed? How easy it is to get exasperated and say : ‘Why don’t you leave that wretch?’ but the words which should follow stick in her throat: ‘You can come and stay with me...’ How many times she has thought of saying that, but has not been able to work up the courage. Where can she possibly accommodate Bhagwati and her three children? True, there are three rooms in the house, but Minna has three children of her own, besides her husband’s young brother staying with them. The children have already started saying they need a separate room for study. The saving grace, she thinks, is that they managed to rent this house five years ago at Rs 650 a month.

If they look for another house like this one now, they'll have to pay at least Rs 1,500. Sure, her husband is a government officer, and earns Rs 1,900 a month. He keeps Rs 400 for his personal expenses and hands over Rs 1,500 to Minna. It's up to her to manage the house on that. The family is small—two boys, one girl. But it seems to her that the Rs 1,500 is hardly in her hands before it is all gone—650 for house rent, 250 for the children's school fees. And 600 left over for the whole month's rations, milk, vegetables, electricity, water, and dozens of small things like soap, oil, toothpaste.

And how is she to make the same Rs 600 pay for the children's books, summer and winter uniforms, shoes, socks? Minna doesn't remember a single month when all three children at the same time had a decent pair of new shoes each. How could they, when the most ordinary pair of shoes for a two year old costs Rs 35! Minna almost shrinks from going to the market. A shopping trip sends her into a depression. At home, Rs 300 looks like such a big sum. One thinks one can buy a great many things with it. But when you reach the market and start asking prices, your heart begins to sink: "Peas Rs 8 a kilo, Rs 12 for a packet of Surf, even a pair of socks for a small child costs not less than Rs. 6!"

Only Minna knows how difficult it is for her to eke out 30 days on those Rs 1,500 and what mental acrobatics it involves. The newspaper is full of comments on deficit financing whenever a new budget or five year plan is being floated. Minna often wonders how the government will ever manage to repay the crores of deficit that accumulate each year. If she's even 15 days late in paying the grocer's bill, how embarrassed she feels to go to the market! Her husband feels he has done his duty once he has handed over Rs 1,500 to her. He also feels entitled to expect at least *dal*, one vegetable and *raita* at every meal. As well as special dishes on Sundays and holidays. There was a time when *pulao* and *raita* were considered a special Sunday meal. Now he turns up his nose at it. "Oh lord, that same old *pulao*! Why can't you learn to make something interesting, like noodles,

for example?"

Last Sunday, she made *kheer*, and he was ready with his nasty comment: "What was the use of my looking for an educated, modern wife, if I am doomed to spend my life eating *kheer*? Why don't you read *Femina* or *Eve's Weekly*? Last week, I was leafing through one of them and I saw a recipe for a fantastic pineapple pudding. Or why don't you take a cue from Mrs Mehra—she's always turning out a Chinese meal or a French pudding. After all, there ought to be a difference between your cooking and my mother's cooking. You're an educated, modern woman!"

Minna has grown so used to hearing such speeches that she doesn't think it necessary to answer. In the early years of their marriage, there used to be heated arguments whenever Ravi made such remarks. Here she was, emerging hot and bothered from the kitchen, and there he was, ready with a new sarcasm each day. She would fling a retort at him: "Why don't you go get yourself a five star cook from hotel Maurya, or better still, go and marry a cook? Here the kids need socks, and

she was on fire, body and spirit. How she longed to pick up the bowl of *kheer* and throw it in Ravi's face. But how could she, when she knew it would be a good six months before they could afford to buy a new bowl! Hot tears of helplessness would sting her eyes as she spat back: "Who's talking of saris? I haven't been able to buy myself a single blouse from your salary in these five years! I'm still wearing the clothes my mother gave me."

That was enough to make Ravi pick up the bowl of *kheer*, hurl it to the floor, and stamp out of the house. What a fine end to the special Sunday lunch! Ravi could smash the bowl and then storm out. What was there for Minna to smash—her own head?

But how long can one carry "on like this, smashing crockery, and fighting like cats and dogs? What with the children watching, and picking up their father's ways, gradually Minna had to teach herself to swallow her anger and remain silent. Now she either turns a deaf ear to Ravi, or offers herself a reasonable explanation for his behaviour: "Poor fellow, he works so hard all day. Naturally, he expects a good meal when he returns home." She tries to save money in every possible way. When Rahul's sweater tears, she unravels and reknits it into a warm vest for Sonu. Instead of giving the children's clothes to the tailor, she stitches them at home. She used to love reading, but since the children came, she hasn't been able to buy herself a single book. She consoles herself by thinking: "This is not the age for me to read. It's enough if we can somehow manage to educate the children."

Educating them is hard enough now that a four year old's tuition fees are Rs 75 plus bus fare, uniforms, books, notebooks, and dozens of incidentals. Far from buying herself a sari, months often pass before she can bring herself to buy a new pair of slippers, when the old pair gets torn. "How often do I go out? At home, anything will do", she tells herself, "And even when I do go out, my sari hides my slippers." As for saris, her mother gives her one or two a year, or her brother sends her one at Diwali. She is so careful with them that her marriage saris still look good as new. When



-Lydia Victor

Sonu has to have a winter uniform. Should I worry about that, or about your noodles?"

Ravi would flare up immediately: "Time enough to worry about their socks when you are through with your saris and fashions."

Hearing this, Minna would feel as if

a sari does get worn out, Minna can't bear to throw it away, so she stitches it into curtains.

In spite of all this, she has to hear the same irritable remarks : "Heaven knows how you manage to make a whole month's salary disappear in 15 days !" At such times, Minna reminds herself that she is more fortunate than are many others. At least, Ravi always hands over the major part of his salary to her. Just look at poor Uma next door. Every morning, she has to tell her husband what she needs to buy, whether milk or vegetables, and he then puts the exact price of it into her hands. On days when he is in a temper, he doesn't even deign to do that. The poor thing has no idea how much her husband earns. Ravi has never humiliated her by making her beg for each five rupee note, nor has he ever asked her to account for what she spends. He keeps only Rs 400 for himself, and he too has difficulty managing. By the end of the month, Minna usually has to pay for his cigarettes from the vegetable budget. After the tenth of the month, when she has paid all the bills, Minna has to stop and think every time she spends a rupee.

But today was only the third of the month, so Minna was feeling quite carefree. When she saw Bhagwati nearly in tears, Minna couldn't restrain herself. "How much did that *bibi* pay you ?"

"She paid Rs 25. That was the money with which I bought vegetables once a day. In the morning, I give the children dry roti with salt, but in the evening they like to have a little dal or vegetable. Now what will I eat and what will I feed them, out of Rs 125 ?"

The words slipped out of Minna's mouth : "Listen, you wash the clothes in my house from this month. Then your children needn't go without their vegetable." She had said it—and she had wanted to say it—but immediately she felt upset. "Another added expenditure. And she's sure to use more washing soap than I do. If I'd just asked her to wash the clothes, she'd have happily agreed to do it for 15 or 20 rupees. But now perhaps she'll expect me to pay 25 since the job she has lost used to pay her Rs 25." But

looking at Bhagwati's tearful face, Minna couldn't bring herself to do such petty bargaining. How could she haggle over five or ten rupees when confronted with that sad face ?

So from the third of the month, Bhagwati began to wash the clothes as well, besides continuing to wash the dishes and clean the house. Minna had been paying her Rs 50 a month for those two jobs. Minna feels quite pleased that this payment is higher than the "rate" prevailing in the colony. There is not really so much work to be done in her house. Minna never cooks lunch on weekdays. The children come home from school at 4, Ravi and his brother return around 6.30. In the morning, she prepares a packed lunch for each of them. Why cook lunch just for herself at noon? She manages with a cup of tea. After all, she rarely gets to have breakfast before 11.30. When everyone leaves at 9, the house looks as if it has been hit by a tornado—dirty clothes lying all around, wet towels on the beds, one of Sonu's socks under the bed and the other out on the verandah, Ravi's soiled vest draped on the sofa or thrown on the ironing table. It takes her at least two hours every day to set the house in order. Bhagwati is supposed to do the cleaning, but is sweeping and mopping all the cleaning that is required ?

Minna gets up at 6 in the morning and starts preparing for the five of them to leave. When they finally depart at 9, she feels as if she has entertained a marriage party and sent it on its way. Ravi is no better than a child. He can't even take his own clothes out of the cupboard. Voices echo all around : "Mummy, where is this ? Minna, where is that ?"

After tidying the house, Minna spends one and a half hours washing the clothes. She tries to get an hour's rest in the afternoon. But her mind refuses to rest. It recalls that Sonu's vest has to be mended or Ravi's shirt has to have new buttons stitched on. From 6 in the morning to 11 at night, there is always something or other to be done.

The work never shows any signs of getting finished. Now that the children are somewhat old gets six or seven hours'

sleep at night. When they were small, night and day seemed to merge into each other. Minna felt like a nurse who for years has been on 24 hour emergency duty, without casual leave, without sick leave, without a Sunday off.

Now that Bhagwati has started washing the clothes, Minna gets a couple of hours' rest in the afternoon. She borrows some books from the lending library, but ten years of not reading seem to have taken their toll. She finds it hard to concentrate, even on a novel. After reading four or five pages, her eyes begin to shut. She has been working non stop from 6 to 12. Where is she to find the energy to read ? Well, at least she manages a nap.

The dilemma continued in her mind : "How much should I pay for washing the clothes? 15 is too little. I think 20 should be all right. But she must be expecting 25. It's all my fault—I should have put things more clearly."

As it was Minna found it difficult to pay Rs 50. She often thought that if she were to do the dishwashing and the cleaning herself, she could save some money and buy some fruit for the children. But 75 ! The thought of it made regret her softheartedness.

On a day when there was a big heap of soiled clothes, bedsheets and bedcovers to be washed, Minna's heart would melt: "Poor thing, where does she get the energy to do the work of five houses ? I find it hard enough to manage my own." This feeling would lead her to decide: "I'll give her Rs 25. Let her make something out of the deal."

But on a day when there chanced to be fewer clothes, Minna would begin hesitating all over again. "25 rupees for a few clothes like these. And they're hardly even dirty, one has to do is soak them and rinse them out. No one else would pay her more than 15. I'll give her 20—that's more than enough. In any case, what about all the other things I do for her. I gave her an old sari last month, and I'm always giving her the children's outgrown clothes. These days, how many people would give away old clothes when one can get a good steel bowl in exchange for three old saris."

Once she got into this frame of mind, she would reckon up every cup of tea, every left over scrap of food or old sari given to Bhagwati, and would end up feeling quite pleased with herself for her noble, charitable impulses. "After all, I give her a cup of tea every day. Such a big cup of tea would cost at least 50 paise in the market. And then I give her all the left over food, even though left overs don't go bad these days. I could easily keep them in the fridge and use them two days later."

Every day, sometimes several times a day, Minna's mind would swing like a pendulum between 20 and 25. The day Bhagwati took a holiday, Minna would decide on 20. But the day Minna had guests and Bhagwati uncomplainingly washed piles of dishes, or the day Minna cleared out the storeroom and Bhagwati spent an extra hour helping her, Minna would feel ashamed of herself. "Poor thing, she never calculates the way I do. She ungrudgingly does all the extra work I pile on her, yet I am so stingy with every five rupees I give her. I don't worry about the money spent on the kids. I'd cheerfully spend my last paisa on them, yet who knows, when they grow up, they'll probably turn their backs on us."

But the dilemma persisted. Was it at all possible to resolve it? If one considered what Bhagwati needed and deserved, even Rs 50 would be too little. Minna well knew how much energy goes into washing clothes. "But how can I be responsible for her needs?" she would think irritably. "Why has she gone and produced three children, when she doesn't know where her next meal is coming from?"

Her irritation couldn't last long, however. She well remembered the day when Bhagwati's husband had beaten her black and blue because she had gone with Minna to the hospital, and had had herself fitted with a loop. He hadn't given Bhagwati any peace till she got the loop removed.

When she saw Bhagwati look tired and ill fed, Minna often felt like giving her a glass of milk, but then she would think of her own children: "They are hardly swimming in milk and butter," and she

would stop herself.

By the 29th of the month, Minna had still been unable to resolve the dilemma of whether to pay 20 or 25. She tried to shake herself out of it: "Why am I acting so petty and mean? As if a saving of five or ten rupees will make such a great difference to the house! Anyway, who is going to give me any credit for such an accomplishment!"

It was easy to give herself a sermon, but she knew that it was only by saving such small sums that she was able to maintain the veneer of "respectability" in their household. She had never let herself spend Rs 2.50 on a scooter even when she



came home from the market, laden with three heavy shopping bags full of the month's rations. No, she would wait half an hour in the hot sun and travel in a jampacked bus. Then how could she so easily bring herself to spend Rs 25 on getting clothes washed?

That day, Ravi came home in a very good mood. "Minna, remember Rakesh, that old friend of mine? He's been transferred to Delhi. I've invited the whole family to lunch on Sunday—that's day after tomorrow. Just see that there's a real *daawat*, OK? He's a very good friend of mine. Whenever I've been to Kanpur, he's entertained me like a prince. Don't forget to make chicken curry."

Minna gazed open mouthed at him. "My dear sir, do you realize that you are ordering this feast on the 29th of the month? Where do you think the money for the chicken is going to come from?"

"Oh come on, don't give me that line. As if I don't know that women always put by a nest egg from their husbands' salaries. And Rakesh isn't just any friend. He's a very special friend."

It was useless to argue so she fell silent. And sure enough—the chicken, the *pulao*, the jelly and custard were all prepared, besides the usual *dal* and vegetables.

"If this is what makes him happy, well and good. After all, he's earning the money. What right do I have to refuse?"

Minna immersed herself in preparations for the guests. Everything went off well on Sunday, but in the midst of the gaiety, suddenly Minna's face grew pale. Where had Ravi got those four bottles of beer from? Two days ago, he had asked Minna to lend him money for cigarettes. Struck by a thought, Minna put down the dish she was holding, and went into the bedroom. She opened the cupboard and exclaimed aloud in anger. Her small piggy bank was lying there—open, empty. All the money she had saved up so painfully, by selling old newspapers and old tins—gone. She had intended to buy Sonu's winter uniform with that money! She felt like going and hitting Ravi on the head with the piggy bank. Paralysed by rage, she sat there without moving for a good 20 minutes. She altogether forgot that she had put the chicken curry on the gas stove, to get warmed up. After a while, Ravi called out: "Hey madam, have you gone off to sleep or what? Can't you smell the chicken burning?"

Minna got up, startled. Why throw a tantrum in front of guests? When she went into the drawing room, she had the same smile plastered on her face, she was once more the ideal wife and gracious hostess.

After lunch, Rakesh and Ravi sat down to cards while Rakesh's wife helped Minna to clear away. There was a whole heap of dishes. Bhagwati had spent the afternoon at Minna's house, to help out with the extra work. As per Minna's instructions, she had

worn specially washed clothes, in honour of the guests. Two days ago, her husband had beaten her badly, because she had admitted her eldest daughter into school, without taking his permission. Her body was still covered with bruises, and her left elbow was aching. ? Still she had mopped the floor twice over today, and washed all the crockery with great care. She had peeled the vegetables, and ground the spices for Minna. She finished her work in the other houses as quickly as possible so as to be back in time to help Minna serve the food. It was three in the afternoon, and Bhagwati was busy in the



kitchen.

“You have your lunch first, wash the dishes afterwards”, Minna told her. She heaped a plate for Bhagwati, and then set to cleaning the kitchen shelves. After a short while she sensed that Bhagwati finished eating. Without turning to look at her, Minna said in a low voice: “Listen. From tomorrow, you need not wash the clothes. I’ll wash them myself. I get fed up with having nothing to do all day long.” And with that, she hastily went of the kitchen.

(translated from Hindi)

Tortured For A Pair Of Missing Studs

Kaniyamma, aged 25, employed for the past four years as a domestic servant in the house of a retired Reserve Bank of India official Ramdass, in T Nagar, Madras, has alleged that she was brutally tortured by the police while being interrogated in a spurious case. It all started when the Ramdass family discovered that a pair of diamond studs was missing. They lodged a complaint with the police on April 10 at 6 p.m. When Kaniyamma went to the house to do her second round of work, she was not allowed to leave the house, and at 9 p.m. was taken to the police station in Teynampet where she was interrogated.

On April 11, Kaniyamma was arrested and taken to the police station where she was kept in custody for 20 days and brutally tortured. She says she was beaten about eight times a day. She says sub inspector Manoharan used to take off her sari and beat her, pour water on her, poke her with a four inch needle. This treatment continued for 16 days.”

Kaniyamma says that after 16 days her employer informed the police that the missing studs had been found, so she was taken to the employer’s house and there made to hand over the studs to her employer in the presence of eight constables. She says that when her

brother and a family friend went to the police station to find out what was happening, they were also severely beaten up by Manoharan. When her mother and her daughter came to see her, she was beaten in front of them, and she was not allowed to feed the child. She alleges that the sub inspector made an attempt to rape her but somehow she escaped by shouting and making a noise. Contusions can be seen on her hands, chest and other parts of her body. She says she had decided to commit suicide if the torture continued.

Two days after the studs were found, Kaniyamma was taken to Saidapet court. The police warned her not to tell the judge about the torture. On the same day she was taken to the hospital where doctors certified that she had several injuries on her body. Kaniyamma was released on bail 20 days after her arrest. Local leaders and slum dwellers of Vijayaraghavacharian Road helped Kaniyamma to write letters of complaint to various police officials and authorities.

The police have not yet withdrawn the case against Kaniyamma. They assert that the studs were recovered from a room in her employer’s house on information given by her. They also deny having tortured her.

-Sunila Singh

Cabarets In Colleges?

I am a student of the College of Vocational Studies, University of Delhi. The college is coeducational, but boys outnumber girls, and dominate the union. In February-March each year, college unions hold their annual functions and festivals. The Vocational College also planned such a function year. When the principal asked the union leaders what kind of programme they had planned, they replied : “We have planned a very interesting programme which will include cabaret and disco dances.” ”I was stunned at this reply”, says the principal.

When he refused to let a cat show be staged in the college, the students were offended, and argued that if cabarets can be staged in elite restaurants and hotels of the capital city, there is no reason why they cannot be part of a college function. Since he remained firm in his refusal, union leaders insulted him and some other staff members. Two of the union leaders suspended. When the union leaders decided to call for a strike the authorities closed the college for an indefinite period.

-Kiran Dua