

Ma

FIVE months ago, my mother died. While she was in hospital, I had written down these events of her life. I hesitated to send it anywhere, but then I thought I should share it with everyone, especially with women. I am sending it to **Manushi**. When my mother told me this story of her life, I asked her whether I should write about it. I showed her the interviews with women that have appeared in **Manushi** and told her that if I sent it anywhere, it would be to **Manushi**. She said: "Do whatever seems right to you."

It all started when I received a telegram: "Ma unwell, come immediately." I set out for home.

All the way, I kept wondering what could have happened to Ma. Could her chronic asthma have assumed a serious form? She had gone on a pilgrimage. Had something happened to her there? Laden with these questions, I reached home.

I found Ma walking about, as usual. She stared at me, eyes wide. Her face looked different. The first thing she said was: "Where have you come from? Didn't the police catch you? Don't go out now. They will catch you because of me."

I could not understand the implications of what Ma was saying but I began to understand the nature of her illness. Ma had suffered a nervous breakdown. It had happened during the pilgrimage and she had been brought home. Why had Ma had a nervous breakdown? Why was she constantly



Chetna's mother

talking of police terror? I could not understand it, no one could understand it. None of us could plumb the depths of her condition.

While I was pondering these things, Ma began to scream: "I haven't stolen anything. I do not know where the jewels are. You can make me lie on slabs of ice if you wish but I know nothing."

Ma was trembling in fear but there was rage in her eyes. As soon as she saw me she began to say: "Go away from here. They will catch you too. I am doomed to destruction, in any case." On her insistence, I had to go into the other room.

I began to realise that the tension of past events was hanging like a cloud over Ma's head. Ma was mentioning theft. We had heard something about this in our childhood. Ma's brother's house was in our village, on the way to the temple. When we went to the temple, our grandmother used to call us and give us toffees. At home, we children were told never to go to our uncle's house. When we asked why, we were told that our mother's family had committed a theft from our house. We were not told any more details. Ma was not allowed to

go there either. Once, Ma did tell me something about it.

Four years ago, I had joined the movement to rename Marathwada University as Babasaheb Ambedkar University. I had to go to jail. When I returned from jail, Ma remarked: "I was threatened with being sent to prison; you've actually been there."

I asked: "Why were you threatened with being sent to prison?"

Ma said: "In connection with that theft." So saying, Ma retreated into the past. "Listen", she said, "Never get married into a wealthy family. When my marriage was arranged, people said I was very fortunate because I was marrying into such a wealthy family. I too had dreams of going to a big house. My marriage had been arranged when I was a child. At that time, neither family was prosperous. But by the time I grew up, my in-laws had become prosperous. They were no longer enthusiastic about the marriage but they could not call it off, for fear of social disgrace. So the marriage took place. I was only 16 years old at that time."

"On the day of our wedding, Mataji (mother-in-law) happened to start her

period so she could not welcome us, the newly weds, home. She could not take part in any of the rituals. This made everyone decide that I was inauspicious. There was a cholera epidemic in the village. Mataji's sister contracted it and died. Then your father got cholera but he recovered. These incidents confirmed everyone in the belief that my entry into the family had brought tragedy in its wake.

"One night, Mataji had gone to stay with some relatives. Your father and I slept alone in a room. The next day, Mataji returned home and told us she had dreamt that there had been a theft in the house. The cupboard was opened and found empty. There was an uproar in the village. The police were called to investigate. I was the only new person in the house. Your father and I had slept in the room where the cupboard was. So I was questioned. Your father was not questioned at all. Everyone in the house began to say that my brother was the thief. Then some of the missing papers relating to land ownership were found in my brother's fields. My brother and I were accused. The investigation began. I was turned out of the house and sent back to my parents' house.

"The police used to take me to the police station every day. They threatened me. They said: 'Tell us where the stolen goods are, otherwise we will whip you and make you lie on ice slabs.' I felt very afraid to go to the police station alone. But no one was allowed to go with me. The villagers were silenced. My in-laws were rich, were considered a respectable family. No one dared say a word against them.

"My asthma grew worse. The interrogations went on. Then, one day, your grandfather (father's father) told the police to close the case. He said: 'Whoever stole the jewels has prospered. We don't want the jewels.' That was the end of the affair. It was never found out who had stolen the jewels. But if the case was to be closed, why was it ever begun? Why was I harassed and humiliated?"

Many questions arose from what Ma told me. Had a theft really taken place? Or was it because they did not want to keep Ma in the house?

I could have asked my father about this, but no one ever talked of it in the house. They did talk of grandfather's generosity and praised him for his heart of gold. But no one seemed to have any information about the jewels or, if they had, they never said a word about it.

After Ma was sent to her parents, my father was told to remarry. But he refused. Seven years later, father called Ma back. But it took years for Ma to be accepted by the family. She suffered the tortures that every woman who is not accepted by her in-laws' routinely suffers. Her asthma became much worse.

Today, no one in the family has the slightest idea that any such incident ever took place. We children knew nothing of it. Ma had been told that she could live in this house only if she totally broke off links with her natal family. Ma had been forced to obey this order. Despite all this, today, there is no conflict in the house, so smoothly has everything been arranged.

But what did Ma suffer? Ma says: "I was finished. I never lived my own life. I could not even bring up the children. I could not experience my own children, could not partake in their upbringing. I had lost all confidence in myself, so that I would often forget the way home, if I went out at night. My children are closer to their father and grandmother." And this last was because my father and his mother have the reputation of being openminded, modern people.

When Ma told me all this, I was stunned. I felt this issue should be raised with my father. He should be asked whether the whole affair was a conspiracy. But Ma did not want our relations with father to be spoilt. So we sisters remained quiet. Today, why had Ma suffered this fit? Why had she retreated into her life of 30 years ago?

I began to take Ma out for a walk each morning, so that she could get out of the terrorised state she was in at home. One day, as we walked along, I asked her: "Ma, how has this happened to you?" Ma looked at me and smiled slightly. The look of fear on her face had been replaced by a grave look.

Ma said: "When I went on the

pilgrimage, the thought kept coming to my mind: 'I am going on this pilgrimage but I am not pure.' I just could not get this thought out of my mind. When we reached Rajgir, we were to visit a temple where there is a window known as the window of heaven. It is said that only one who is pure can pass through that window. I felt 'I will not be able to pass through. I am not pure.' I didn't go to the window. But as I was worshipping, I felt that god would not accept my worship. My mind was in turmoil.

"We were to be carried up to Giriraj in palanquins. One of the men carrying the palanquin had a face like the policeman who had investigated the theft. He had big moustaches just like that policeman. Suddenly, I felt afraid that this man might rape me. I fainted away in terror. After that, I do not know what happened."

Looking at Ma at that moment, I felt she was quite well. I asked: "Why did you fear that he might rape you?"

Ma said: "I am trying to tell you something. Don't tell anyone. When the theft was being investigated, I used to be called alone to the police station for interrogation. The policeman with big moustaches raped me. You are working for women, you can understand what I say, but don't tell anyone else. No one knows. If they come to know, they will blame me."

My mind was not willing to believe what my ears heard. I had not the courage to ask for details.

The doctors said: "She has schizophrenia. It was a serious attack but she will recover in a while." But who knew what Ma's illness was? Who tried to understand it?

In a short while, Ma once more took control of herself and began to live as a woman should live in society. Suppressing the insecurity, the doubts, the anger in herself, she once again lived as a wife and mother, who is the repository of the honour of a big family, should live.

I had always related to Ma as a daughter to a mother. For the first time, I came to know Ma as a woman. Perhaps Ma too came to know me as a woman.

(translated from Hindi).