

Bimla

—A Profile
In Resourcefulness

Very few labouring women in India are able to achieve even minimal upward mobility by their own efforts despite a lifetime of toil. Hemmed in by restrictions, they operate within narrow confines and are almost never able to expand their options much.

Bimla, the woman here profiled by Poonam Kaul is extraordinary in that despite being poorly educated and unskilled, she managed to substantially upgrade her own and her family's status by dint of her courage, determination and resourcefulness. She was not afraid to try out new ways of improving her life, even in the face of familial and societal disapproval. Over the years, she managed to draw on varied sources of support to build a more dignified life.



—Poonam

Bimla first caught my attention when she was delivering milk on her bike in Lajpat Nagar, New Delhi. Even in the capital city, a middle aged woman astride a bike is a rarity. Office going women are occasionally seen driving a moped or a scooter, but female cyclists are usually in their early teens and confine their movements to the bylanes of residential areas.

The day I went to Simla's house to interview her, she had gone on her milk round and her husband, Govind Lal, who plies an autorickshaw, asked me to wait.

While I waited, he made no effort to clear the mess in the passage that leads to the only room in their house. Until Bimla returned an hour later, I saw him engage in only two activities—combing his wet hair, and warding off the evil eye from his vehicle with joss sticks. These activities he performed in a leisurely manner and with extreme fastidiousness.

On her return at 11.45 a.m., Bimla prepared tea for herself and Govind Lal. This was the first refreshment she had taken since the previous night's meal. She served him the breakfast she had cooked

before leaving home at 6:30 a.m., offloaded her bike of bags containing milk bottles, and settled down for the taped conversation. Govind Lal still hung about the house, seemingly reluctant to leave for the day's work.

When asked what had led her to take up paid work, Bimla said : "You have seen with your own eyes my husband's behaviour, Shirking work has infected even the marrow of his bones."

They were married in 1965 when Bimla was 17 and Govind Lal 25. "My father died when I was in class five. My mother withdrew me from school when I was in class eight, and got me married. My mother-in-law owned a house in Bhogal and she earned Rs 150 a month as a painter of lorry signs", narrated Bimla. "This family background seemed sound to my mother (though I think it was a hasty decision), so she got us married. I wanted to study further and I am sure that if my father had been alive, he would have educated me."

Bimla's widowed mother had taken to working as a maidservant to support her four children. The two sons did not contribute to household expenses, and Simla's younger sister had a chronic heart ailment. As a schoolgirl, Bimla used to do odd jobs, like threading beads for transistors, and supplying milk bottles, to supplement her mother's meagre income. Some savings that Bimla's father had left behind and part of the Rs 3,000 from the sale of their house were spent on her wedding. By this time, her younger brother had found a job and mended his ways. After marriage, Bimla's first experience of work was giving tuition to primary school children. Soon after, her mother-in law sold the house they had lived in, to repay the debt incurred for her daughter's wedding. She moved into a hut with her younger son, while Bimla and her husband rented a room for Rs 10. "It was here that my troubles began. My husband had got a job as a driver in 1966, when my first son was born. He got about Rs 350 but he never gave me a paisa. He bought some provisions in the first week of the month



-Poonam

will and the child was destined to be born. After that, I practised restraint. I told my husband to maintain a distance. The doctor said I was too weak to, undergo sterilisation. Then, someone suggested I use a copper T (intrauterine device). I must have got it done about four years after my second child was born."

At this time, Bimla was 25 years, old. Her diet was so poor that she could not breastfeed her younger son.

Her brother-in-law even suggested giving a daily wage to Bimla from his own earnings to dissuade her from working outside. "I told him, you will pay me on the first day, and, perhaps, on the second day, but then you are likely to stop. Your mother will be the first to object."

Her husband was only intermittently employed. He and his unmarried brother hired an autorickshaw which they used to

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and expected me to make do with theft). I had to keep the house running somehow. Towards the end of the month we often ran out of vegetables and lentils. We had to eat dry *chapatis*. There used to be no milk to feed the child. My mother had to help me run the house. I started stitching people's clothes to earn something. People around me said : 'You will starve to death if you carry on like this. There is no shame in taking up work'"

This was a period of great financial hardship for the family. Govind Lal resigned his job. To save the rent, the family moved into a hut adjacent to that in which Govind Lal's younger brother lived.

Bimla wanted to get sterilised when her first son was three years old. She had breastfed him until then. Within three months of discontinuing breastfeeding, she found herself pregnant again: "The second child was born accidentally. My husband returned home drunk. Well, it just happened. I went to the doctor but she said it was too late. I took many pills but I suppose it was god's

ply by turns. But the income from it was insufficient. Bimla began to work as a housemaid on the sly, fearing her husband's wrath. But her brother-in-law gave her game away. In a few months, she was earning Rs 300 (about Rs 30 from each of the 10 houses where she was employed to wash utensils and clean the floors). Her income was the sole support for the family in the six months that Govind Lal was unemployed. "It was at this time that an old woman who used to scheme milk bottles from a depot and supply them to her customers' residences, induced Bimla to take up this trade. Bimla began in a small way supplying about 25 to 30 bottles of milk each day, in addition to her work as a domestic servant. Her first customers were those who employed her as a maid. Gradually, orders increased as word spread that "Bimla delivers milk right."

People would drop in at Bimla's home to place orders. Some regular customers would also come to make minor changes in their orders. This irked her brother-in-law. Not only did he actively try to prevent



—Sue Darlow

“I was not one to lose heart when I didn’t have enough to eat. I could always find a way to earn with my two hands.”

prospective customers from reaching Bimla but also manhandled a few. “From that, he progressed to beating me up. Before this, my husband used to quarrel with me, but he had never hit me. Now, taking the cue from his brother, he too beat me up. I told him pointblank : ‘Either earn enough to support the family or don’t come in my way.’ How ironical—I had to earn to support the family and on top of it get beaten for doing so. I told him I was determined to work and educate my sons and for this I was willing to face anything. I kept up my work and nothing deterred me. For several years, my husband did not contribute a paisa for the family’s upkeep. He would taunt me : ‘Fend for yourself, do as you like. You won’t get any help from me.’ Call it my power of endurance that I survived all this.”

After nearly 12 years of working at both jobs, Bimla gave up domestic service: “In 1975, I remember distinctly, on Diwali, there was not a rupee in the house. My husband quietly stayed away. I finally earned Rs 20 by whitewashing someone’s house, and bought lamps and crackers. I did not want

my children to feel their parents could not afford to illumine the house on such an auspicious day.” I asked if she had done this kind of work before, to which she replied : “Never But I was not one to lose heart when I didn’t have enough to eat. I could always find a way to earn with my two hands. On that Diwali, my brother-in-law also turned up and gave my son Rs 5. My neighbours also helped.”

Today, Bimla supplies 150 bottles in the evening and about 30 bottles besides 10 packets of milk in the morning. On each bottle she makes a profit of about 25 paise. This works out to a monthly income of Rs 1,200. Sometimes she manages to make up to Rs 300 extra when people order extra bottles for parties. However, the reason she gave for the change of job from domestic service to milk vending was not financial : “I feel this work of supplying milk is *sucha* (nonpolluting) compared to dishwashing. Also, it put an end to daily aggravations from dissatisfied employers. If an employer complains about late delivery of milk, one can say the milk van turned up late. But the tension from

working in people’s houses was unbearable. As if the tension in my family was not enough.”

Although Bimla did not receive much support from her family, she was successful in developing friendships which stood her in good stead and played a crucial part in the gradual improvement of her status. It was a friend who helped her to acquire the bike, for instance. Initially, she used to deliver milk on foot.

The milk depot is about a kilometre away from her residence, and the customers’ homes are scattered about. She used to carry the bottles in wire grids and, later, when orders increased, in shoulder bags. “This gave me painful bruises on my hips, and my legs too would ache. A broken cycle belonging to my husband was lying in Trilokpuri. I had learnt to cycle in my childhood but after marriage, as long as I lived with my in-laws, I never thought of using the bike.”

In 1973, Bimla’s family had moved away from her brother-in-law. Even then, she felt inhibited about using the bike. “But a friend of mine advised me : ‘Don’t bother about what people say. You know you have to bear the responsibility of running the house. If you continue to carry the milk in heavy shoulder bags, you will cripple yourself. Your limbs will not hold out.’ You see, each bottle weights half a kilo. This friend accompanied me to Trilokpuri and we brought the skeleton of the bike by bus to Jangpura. If she had not promised to lend me the money for its repair, I would not have taken the initiative to bring it. It cost Rs 130 to repair, and my friend could not pay the whole amount. So I approached my *dharmbhai* (adopted brother) and he readily lent me the money. I repaid him by supplying milk free of charge for a while.”

The adopted brother was a high school student from a Sikh family where she delivered milk. He had five brothers but no sister. His whole family also has great affection for her and asked her to tie a *rakhi* on him. When he grew up and began to work as a plumber in a housing factory, he helped her out on several occasions. Later he married and now lives in Amritsar.

The cycle was of great use to Bimla: “The other women milk suppliers in our locality did not use cycles. Men operated on a cycle and seeing them gave me confidence. Other advantages of the cycle were that I could easily carry the provisions for the house on it. But the tremendous relief from pain was the most immediate benefit.

But other mishaps would occur. A brush with a passing vehicle would throw the bike off balance and break bottles. The loss of one bottle costs Bimla Rs 4. Such losses would reduce her to tears. It was her mother who gave her the idea of buying a rickshaw. “Somehow, I managed to buy the skeleton of a rickshaw for Rs 300. Thank god I bought it then as its present cost is Rs 2,000. Now that I am growing old (she is 38) even rickshaw pulling is a strain. I feel pain in the region surrounding the heart. One must accept

heavy loads but “Necessity drove me. I had no option, I would starve if I didn’t work.”

Today, Bimla leaves about a 100 bottles in the rickshaw “at the mercy of god” parked in a vacant plot while she does the rounds of residential areas on the bike. Each round takes her 20 minutes, and she has to climb several flights of stairs.

In 1983 Bimla managed to buy a secondhand refrigerator, with the help of a loan from a customer. She needed this badly to stock left over milk. Earlier, she had to request customers to stock this milk for her in their refrigerators. It took her five hours on her rickshaw which her sons pushed from behind to bring the refrigerator from R. K. Puram. Interestingly, however, the television was purchased in 1975. Bimla narrated how the purchase came about: “One evening, I was hunting for my son, I have never allowed my sons

She has inventively stretched available resources as far as seemed possible.

to get out of my sight. I was afraid they would get into bad company. I finally spied him watching TV through a small aperture in a house in our neighbourhood. It was winter, but this family did not have the courtesy to call my son in. It broke my heart to see him peep-ing like that. The next day, when I narrated this to my *dharmbhai* he promised to help me buy a TV on instalments.” When I expressed surprise at the purchase of the TV having preceded that of the refrigerator, Bimla reacted, as if she had to set the record straight, that the pressure cooker was acquired before the TV: “After returning from milk delivery, I had to cook the dinner on the wood stove. Often, due to



that I have a female body and it can’t bear the strain of rickshaw pulling.” Bimla had to pull the rickshaw within an hour of getting the copper T inserted. Women who use this device are advised not to carry

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exhaustion, I would doze off while the food was cooking.

Occasionally, the entire meal would burn before I woke up and the children would have to go hungry to bed. Once

again, my *dharmbhai* came to my help and paid for the cooker on instalments. I repaid him by supplying milk free.”

Another person Bimla feels greatly indebted to is the elderly neighbour she addresses as Daddy. The one room house she now lives in was built on a vacant plot of land adjacent to Daddy’s house. There were thorny bushes and trees on this land which Bimla cleared on her own.

“The entire plot was overrun with poisonous insects, scorpions and snakes. To you, only the cement floor is visible. But the fear of scorpions and the harm they ‘Could do my sons used to keep me awake whole nights. It took me 10 years of labour to bring it to its present appearance. This wall that you see was raised from handpicked pieces of brick that I came across while delivering milk. I didn’t even have the means to buy cement. I collected spoilt and rejected cement lying outside the housing factory nearby, and sifted it before use. But it kept cracking. The roof was of tin which made the room unbearably hot in summer. My children preferred to sit under the shade of a tree. When I mentioned this to a customer, they save their word of guarantee to a dealer in

Bimla says she was motivated in all that she did, by the desire to educate her sons. With this aim, she tried other avenues of work that she hoped would be more remunerative. She registered at the employment exchange for a job as an *ayah* in a school or hospital but nothing came of it. Some years ago, she filled a temporary vacancy as a “waterman” (serving water and filing coolers at a government dispensary for Rs 50 a month). She picked up some of the techniques of dressing wounds and reading prescriptions, hoping she would be given a permanent job, but left when this did not materialise even after working for five summers.

In 1984, she went to Saudi Arabia as a maidservant for a family, on a two year contract. Her husband and sons were opposed to the idea, but she was adamant. She had heard how other women had made substantial amounts by this kind of venture. While she was away, her sons carried on her milk delivery work. But, she says, she was ill treated by her employers who underfed and overworked her, kept her locked in the house day and night, and spoke to her very rudely. To top it all, they cheated her out of her salary by making

Her husband’s reaction when she consulted him was : “Go if you like, but don’t expect me to bail you out this time. I have enough troubles of my own.”

When I interviewed Govind Lal, he implied that he gave his wife a free hand to run things as she pleased : “I just leave everything to my Mrs. She looks after all the details. I don’t see it as my concern.” This policy of non-interference can, however, also be interpreted as a convenient way of disowning responsibility for the household economy. He repeatedly described Bimla’s contribution to the family kitty as “two or three rupees extra”, and her work as a job that easily fits in with her main role as housewife: “I have discouraged my wife from taking up a 9 to 5 job because I had an eight hour job and if both husband and wife are away the whole day, who will look after the children? My only ambition in life was to educate my sons. They would have been neglected if my wife had taken a fulltime job. I told her to carry on with the milk vending since its timings seemed fine to me.”

This account overlooks the fact that Bimla does spend about eight hours on milk delivery and fits it in with housework only by stretching the workday from 5.30 a.m. to after 11 p.m. In earlier years when she was also working as a maidservant, her day used to begin at 4.30 a.m. Before 1981, when there were milk shortages, she even had to get up at 2.30 a.m. so as to be ahead in the long queue at the milk booth. She would doze for a few hours outside the depot, huddled up on her cart.

Even today, according to her account, the only times in the day that she is not working are an hour in the midmorning when she says her prayers and some time in the evening when she watches TV while chopping vegetables or repairing her milk carrying bags. She has her first meal of the day only at noon—whereas she serves her husband and sons breakfast in the morning and packs lunch for them; and has dinner around 10 p.m. with the rest of the family.

She has been able to build this minimal security through her own enterprise and hard work, and support from friends and neighbours.

stone slabs who gave me the slabs on credit. I paid the price in instalments from my earnings.’

I asked if she feared demolition of the house since it stands on illegally occupied land. She said some years ago an inspector came but her neighbour, Daddy, rang up authorities and settled the matter. He also allowed her to use his address to get a water connection.

Another problem Bimla had to face was the loose talk of people on the streets: “They were not customers, neighbours or relatives—just casual observers who used to say all kinds of things about my character.”

her sign a fraudulent statement, and demanded Rs 7,000 before they would agree to send her back to India. After four months abroad, she returned. She said her mother-in-law advanced Rs 7,000 which her husband sent for her ticket. “I have been paying my mother-in-law in instalments. Even after three years, I still owe her Rs 500. My husband kept the account.”

Despite having burnt her fingers in this encounter, Bimla has not given up the idea of going abroad to earn more. The day I interviewed her, she had met a family leaving for England who offered her Rs 2,000 a month to work as housekeeper, but she would not settle for less than Rs 3,000.

When asked whether his family had received help and support from anyone, Govind Lal mentioned only his mother. He said that when Bimla was stranded in Saudi Arabia and he had to raise Rs 7,000 for her return fare, his mother had lent him Rs 2,000 and he had raised the rest from other sources.

Govind Lal says he gives Rs 5 to 10 to Bimla daily for household expenses, as he has to save some of his earnings towards repaying the bank loan he took to purchase the autorickshaw. He had once gone to Libya but he said he soon returned because the employers were rude to him. He bought a cooler for the family from his earnings there. His account of his worklife is that he has seen many ups and downs like anyone else and that he and his wife can still barely make both ends meet: "I am not in favour of women sitting at home and not seeking employment. How else can a family manage in such inflationary times? In life, what does a man aspire for but to earn more and more for the wife and children?" Bimla, however, has more concrete ambitions. She wants to build a house: "I have passed my prime but I would like the children to have a more secure future."

Bimla acknowledges the respect her sons have given her, but says she has met with only opposition from her husband: "My husband and I never seem to concur. We always have different opinions. If I ask him to walk left, he will walk right. This leads to argument. Now, of course, my sons take my side and silence my husband if he gets abusive by saying: 'After all, what she says is right.'"

She says she put her sons through school without any monetary help from her husband. Bhupinder, aged 22, became apprenticed to an accountant in 1981 but when the accountant died, he had to take a job as storehouse keeper for Rs 550 a month. At present he works for Rs 727 a month with a winedealer, a job he obtained through his maternal aunt, with whom Bimla pleaded on his behalf. Bhupinder says his father got him admitted in school

and also coached him, particularly in mathematics, from class eight onwards. Of his mother, he says: "Ever since I can remember, I have seen my mother taking decisions in the family. My father and we two brothers leave most decisions to her. Whatever she says is in my interest." He hands over his salary to his mother and takes pocket money from her.

The younger son, Anil, aged 18, has just passed out of school. He is now pursuing his graduation through a correspondence course, and working for an export factory at a salary of Rs 400 a month. Cricket is his passion. He has played at the state level and his goal is to play in the Ranji trophy matches.

Bhupinder thinks his mother's work is not respectable and would like her to discontinue it when he and his brother can earn enough to run the house. Although he earns less than half of what she earns, he prefers a salaried job as it is more secure and dignified than milk delivering. Bimla, however, nowhere voiced any desire to give up work and be supported by her

sons. Instead, she spoke with, envy of the old woman who had introduced her to vending, who has managed to build a house from her earnings through this trade.

For the last 12 years or so, Bimla has been the chief breadwinner of her family and also the main contributor to the improvement in their status. She has been able to build this minimal security for her family because of her own enterprise and hard work, and the various kinds of support she received from friends and neighbours. She has inventively stretched the available resources as far as seemed possible.

In some ways, her life can be seen as a success story. It is, however, a telling comment on our society that a woman should have to pour such tremendous energies, virtually all her waking hours and such a great physical effort during the best years of her life, merely to keep from sinking into the vast poverty that surrounds her, and to provide a precarious security for herself and her family.