

“**P**HULESHWARI has become a millionaire. Two young men of the village cut off her hair. What happened was wrong, of course, but, nevertheless she has become a millionaire.”

“How?”

“What didn’t she get? The government is constructing her a house with a grant of Rs 14,500. She is receiving a social security pension. And, every time a political leader visits us he gives her around Rs 500 to Rs 1000. What else does she want?”

These observations came from Shyam Chowdhary at his house. He is one of the leaders of the group of young men who harassed Phuleshwari. His comments clearly illustrate the thought process which is deeply woven into the social fabric of present day rural Bihar.

Phuleshwari Devi, a member of the Chamar caste, is a resident of the Chamar Toli of Rampura village. This village on the Muzaffarpur-Darbhanga road is two km north of Bittaui (Atarbel) Chowk which is about 15 km west of Darbhanga. This village comes under the jurisdiction of the Singhwara Police Station. Rampura village is primarily a village of Bhumiya. Nearly 1,000 Bhumiya families, 80 Chamar families and a few Dusadh, Mallah, and Teli families make up the village. There are a good number of Brahmins and Muslims as well. The *mukhiya* and the *sarpanch* are both Bhumiya, but apart from Rampura village, no other area in the region has such a concentration of Bhumiya.

Phuleshwari’s husband, Vipat Ram, has been untraceable for at least 10 years now. Before that he would visit the village only occasionally. It is commonly believed that he lives in Durgapur and has lost his mental

REPORT

Phuleshwari’s Humiliation

stability. Phuleshwari has three married daughters and two sons. The elder son, Ramashish Ram, has also left home and never visits her. Her younger son, Raju Ram, is 10 years old and the only one of her children

who lives with her. Phuleshwari is known as “*chamain* (midwife)” and she manages to get two or three “*paseris* (approximately 9-13.5 kg)” of grain with every delivery she undertakes and some money from work like massaging. Another midwife of the same village had this to say: “*Chaur mangla par gadal kar lagaet chathi*. (They pick fights even if we ask for rice.)” Phuleshwari is approximately 35 years old, between 5.5 - 6 ft tall, healthy and well-built.

June 21, 1994 was the day of *Muharram*. Around this period a large number of Hindu weddings are generally held. Most men of the Bhumiya Tola of Rampura had gone out of the village during this time. Most men of the Chamar Tola had also left the village to earn money as musicians outside. On that day, Phuleshwari left the Chamar Tola around ten in the morning to collect firewood. She came to a mango garden, belonging to Chander Chowdhary, a married man who is roughly 30 years old. This garden is situated between the Chamar Tola and the Bhumiya Tola and is very close to the Singhwara Divisional Office. Shyam Chowdhary, alias “Hero” Shyam, is about the same age as Chander and lives very close to his house. Both these men generally loaf around the whole day and sometimes indulge in small misdemeanours such as looting and snatching. They forcibly collect money from the village hawkers. Shyam loves to be the arbiter for problems in the village and has made this a means of making money.



It is because of his *filmy* behavior that he is popularly called “Hero” Shyam. Both Shyam and Chander are of a middle-class background, neither owns much land.

While collecting firewood Phuleshwari noticed three ripe mangoes on the ground, picked them up and put them in her basket. Chander reached the spot and had an argument with her. It is difficult to give an exact account of the argument. After the heated exchange of words, Phuleshwari was beaten up and taken to Shyam’s house, who has mastered the art of organising fraudulent panchayats. In this panchayat, it was decided that Phuleshwari should pay a penalty of Rs 1,000. Phuleshwari, however, refused to pay the fine and it was brought down to Rs 150. It was evident to those present at the hearing that a woman who stole three mangoes would be unable to pay the amount demanded. On her refusal to pay up she was dishonoured. According to her statement, she was locked up in a room in the verandah of Shyam’s house for at least four hours, her saree was pulled off and four to five young men abused her physically. When spoken to separately, all she could say was: “*Kichau ne puchu. U sab har tarah se parushan kayalak. Hamra ginjan ka delak.* (Don’t ask me anything. All of them troubled me in every possible way. They have spoiled me.)” After that they cut off the hair from the front portion of her head with a pair of scissors, blackened her face and applied lime on it. Her petticoat and blouse were torn off and she was paraded around the village. Phuleshwari holds Shyam and Chander responsible for the entire incident. She could not name the two other men involved. It is clear that four men played a main part in the misdeed.

Lakshmeshwar Choudhary, the



sarpanch (a Bhumiyar), was not present in the village on the day of the incident. The *mukhiya* is lifeless and totally inactive. Lakshmeshwar returned to the village on June 21 but he took no action until July 6. He claims that he called a meeting of the panchayat on July 7 after he heard of the incident from Janak Ram. In the meeting the Bhumiyars accepted their guilt. They asked the Chamars to impose a penalty on them. The Chamars discussed the matter among themselves and decided that since the Bhumiyars would continue to be their masters there would be no fines to be

paid, but that they had to assure the Chamars that no such incident would ever be repeated. In this way a compromise was made. On the day of the incident the *chowkidar* was on leave because of *Muharram*. According to the villagers, the *chowkidar* later informed the police about the incident but no action was taken.

Despite the evasion and suppression of the issue, both the district administration of Patna and the Harijan *Atyachar Virodhi Koshang* located in Patna came to hear of it. On the orders of the Patna administration, an

inspector met Phuleshwari. She, however, refused to divulge anything because of the agreement between the Bhumiyars and Chamars. But later a magistrate from Darbhanga visited the village and conducted an intensive enquiry. He saw the evidence of injury on Phuleshwari's body and her shaved head. On July 7, Phuleshwari lodged a First Information Report (FIR) in which she did not mention that she had been a victim of sexual attacks but claimed that she had been beaten, her hair had been cut off, her face blackened, that she was locked up in a room and that she had been disrobed and paraded throughout the village.

That a FIR was lodged despite the peace agreement was the result of internal dissension among the Bhumiyars. These problems were caused due to a quarrel over a piece of land. A widow of Rampura village had written her land over to a wealthy Bhumiyar. Later, however, Chander and Shyam took over the land by getting someone to pose as a successor to the widow's property. The Bhumiyars were divided on the issue of this wrangling. When one of the groups realised that despite committing a serious crime, the guilty were going scot free, they publicised the issue in Patna and got the police involved. When property is confiscated a seizure list should be provided, but according to Shyam's father the police gave no such list. The police are allowed to remove only moveable property but in this case they destroyed the brick walls of the house as well.

Inquiries were held on Phuleshwari's humiliation with representatives from all the castes in Rampura

village. The members of the inquiry committee also contacted people from the neighbouring villages. After listening to the various groups, the following conclusions were arrived at:

□ Because of the negligible crime of stealing three mangoes, certain frivolous and criminal-minded Bhumiyar youths mentally and physically tortured Phuleshwari. Circumstantial evidence proves that they physically abused Phuleshwari in the garden. The local men and women did not protest against the incident. No importance was attached to the matter of whether she was raped or not. The unfortunate fact is that a single, poor, and helpless woman was inhumanly tortured.

Generally, the media as well as the educated sections of society put all their efforts into determining only whether the woman was disrobed completely or not, and whether she was raped or not.

□ Phuleshwari has had no contact with her husband for at least 10 years. She has no means of income other than the deliveries she helps with, yet she has the full responsibility of her 10-year-old son. She is still

physically attractive. In such a situation the well-off, frivolous youths of other communities feel tempted to sexually exploit her. Some villagers maintain that Phuleshwari is a woman of easy morals and is involved with several men. Even if we accept that she is involved with many men, is it reason enough for men to dishonour her?

□ If the Bhumiyars had not had a conflict about a piece of land then perhaps news of the incident would not have reached anyone. One group of Bhumiyars wanted to belittle the other and, therefore, they informed the authorities 15 days after the incident. When the other group heard what was happening they quickly called a panchayat and reached an agreement. The local police inspector did not take any action against the culprits. It is believed that the chairman took an active interest in the case only because he, too, belongs to the Chamar community.

□ The upper castes consider such incidents of beating very routine. The attitude is that unless people are punished one cannot expect society to move on the right track. They believe that such cases should not be made into issues at all that it is entirely the fault of the media that this incident is being discussed. And, now, even the political leaders are supporting Phuleshwari, who may become a candidate for the next elections and possibly even a legislative member.

Even now, after all she has been through, such accusations are being levelled against Phuleshwari. There is hardly any support or sympathy for her. People are only conceding that blackening someone's face or cutting off her hair was wrong.



❑ There are no immediate social or economic reasons behind this incident. When we insisted on reasons, a Chamar youth said, “*Maja lene ke liye.* (To have fun).” After our investigation, we felt that it was partly to have fun at a woman’s expense that a lot of people tolerated this ugly incident. In addition, they thought that it would be inviting trouble to oppose such obstinate and criminally-inclined youth.

❑ The *sarpanch* of Rampura, Lakshmeshwar Chowdhary, did not do anything after the incident. It is true that he was not present in the village on the day of the incident. He returned on June 25. He could have initiated action after that - at least he could have met Phuleshwari. Only later was a panchayat called. The meeting itself was not a formal affair. It is clear that no proper action was initiated by the *sarpanch*.

❑ The place where the incident occurred is very close to the Divisional Office. Many officials saw Phuleshwari crying and being taken away forcibly. One official claims that the Block Development Officer (BDO) remarked: “*Kis kis ko hum dekhenge. Pure prakhand ko sambhalna mere bule ki baat nahin hain.* (How many people should we take care of? It is not in my capacity to manage the entire division.)”

❑ No incident, however minor, remains hidden in a village. The crime was committed publicly within one km of the police station and the Divisional Office. We cannot accept that the local authorities were not aware of the incident. And their ignorance about the incident only shows their lazy, corrupt, and biased attitude.

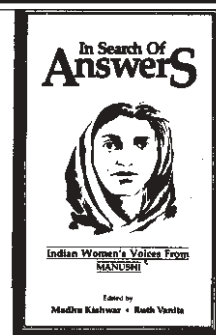
(This report was prepared by Sunaina of Jan Vikas, Bharti of Mansi, Annu of Gramin Seva and Asha of the Samagra Shikshan Evam Vikas Sansthan, Bihar) ❑

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