

**I**N recent years, several new methods of contraception have been introduced in the market. Women want methods which are reversible, have minimal side effects, do not need a doctor's advice to initiate, protect women not only from unwanted pregnancies but also from sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and, most importantly, depend on women's initiative. Currently the only commonly available method to prevent the transmission of STDs and HIV from sexual intercourse is the male condom. This method is used relatively infrequently, because its use depends on male initiative. But now women have been provided the choice of a female condom.

The female condom is made of polyurethane, a material thinner and stronger than latex, the material generally used for the male condom. A small flexible plastic ring is used at the closed end for insertion by the woman and helps to keep the device in place. This inner ring is removable if the couple prefers to use the man's penis for insertion of the condom during intercourse. A larger and a thinner ring at the outer end of the condom stays outside the vagina and covers the external genitalia. It is a prelubricated and disposable method.

## The Female Condom

### Expanding Contraceptive Options

Sulagna Mishra

It can be inserted manually into the vagina much before intercourse.

#### Advantages

- Polyurethane is a stronger material than latex and does not break easily. Temperature and humidity do not affect the female condom as much as they do the male condom, so the effective lifespan of the female condom during storage is longer.

- It provides a more effective barrier against HIV and STDs than the male condom because it covers the cervix, vagina and the vulva.

- Its effectiveness in preventing pregnancy is comparable to other barrier methods. If used correctly, clinical surveys indicate that its effectiveness could be as high as 95-97 percent.<sup>1</sup>

- It has no known harmful side effects and does not cause irritation to the vagina.

- It provides women with a viable alternative to the male condom when men are out of condoms, too drunk to get them on, only have outdated condoms, and otherwise will not, or cannot, use them.

#### Disadvantages

- It is too expensive: a single condom costs about three dollars in the USA which amounts to more than Rs 100 in India. Since it can only be used once, the cost is likely to prove prohibitive for most women.

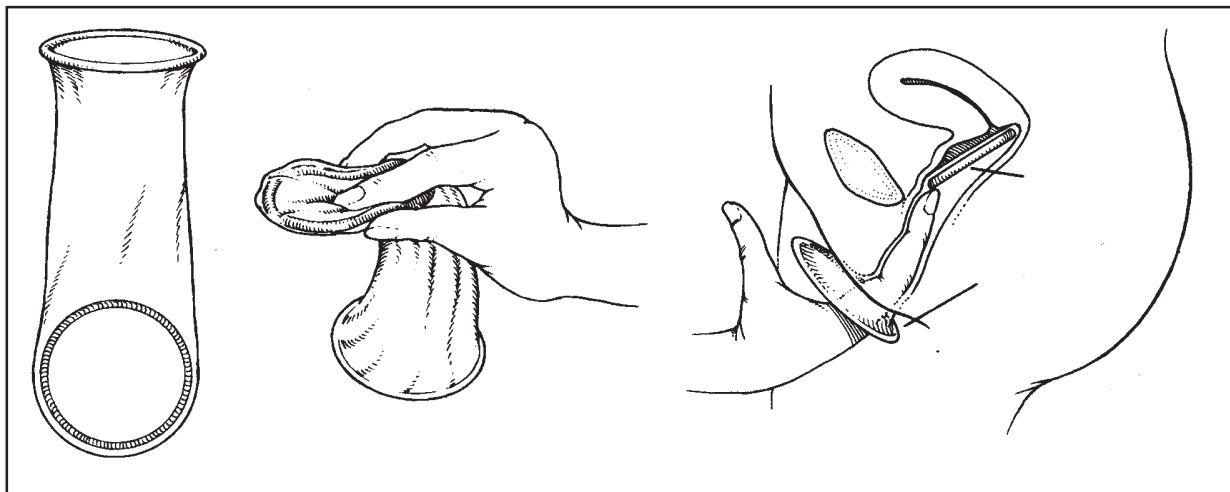
- The penis can enter the vagina outside the female condom or push the whole condom inside the vagina.<sup>2</sup>

- There are complaints that it is too squeaky.

- The internal ring might be painful for both partners.

- Some people find it distasteful because it resembles a plastic bag.

- It may be embarrassing to use,



especially in a new relationship, since its preplacement reveals forethought.

### Availability

The female condom is currently available through the private and the public sectors in Korea, South Africa, Thailand, the USA and many countries of Western Europe. A package of informative materials necessary for the appropriate introduction of the female condom is being developed by agencies including UNAIDS, HRP, FHI, PSI and IIPF. This package will be made

available to all interested governments and NGOs.

Some women who have multiple sexual partners, especially prostitutes, may prefer this method to other barrier methods because they might be more susceptible to STDs. But a recent study conducted by UNAIDS in Thailand revealed that almost all women who have regular partners find this method impractical to use. It is unlikely that the female condom will become a popular method of birth control. However, it

is an important additional option that is attempting to help women prevent unwanted pregnancies and STDs. It could become more viable, if it became inexpensive and further improvements were made in it to make its use more convenient.

1. WHO, *The Female Condom; Fact Sheet*, Special Programme of Research in Human Reproduction, 1996
2. The probability of this was not mentioned in the sources that we used. □

## The Hitherto Forbidden Realm

### Women Take to Priesthood in Maharashtra

V.L. Manjul

AT the beginning of the twentieth century, His Reverence Upasani Baba, who was a contemporary of Saibaba of Shirdi, started a hermitage at Sakori. The hermitage gradually became a place for Dharma and pilgrimage. Virgins in that asrama were addressed as 'sati'. Sati Godavari, among the *satis*, became eminent by her own meritorious deeds.

In this *ashram* training was imparted through worship, sacred recitations, chanting *Bhajans*, religious discourses, study of the vedas, and instructions about the sacrificial rites, etc. Sanskrit was a medium of day-to-day communication. Some of the women in the *ashram* became scholars. Discarding the traditional shackles they carried, they performed sacrificial rites rituals concerned with marriage openly and unhesitantly.

These *satis* supervised the

performance of sacrifices not only in Maharashtra, but also in other places in India and abroad.

Keeping the Sakori ideal in view, the Shankara Seva Samiti of Pune started teaching Sanskrit and *purohitya* to women at Udyanaprasada Karyalaya in 1976. At the beginning, there were only sixteen women trainees. But within ten years there were 160. Among them fifty were elderly women and the rest were younger and included unmarried girls, married and divorced women, and widows. Initially, they were trained in the knowledge of rites of worship, reading of religious texts, marriage procedures, and conducting of different types of sacrifices. Students began the training by performing the rites connected with bathing the deities, (*Abhiseka*), smaller or larger forms of worships, rites about different vows and observances, etc. Slowly,

they learned to perform certain sacrifices. It should be particularly noted that *purohitya* was not restricted to women who were Brahmin by caste but was also open to women of other caste and class.

At the beginning, the training aimed mostly at imparting knowledge. In order to help the society, women *purohitas* used to perform rites free of charge. As time passed on, they began to accept some amount of money as '*dakshina*' and used to hand it over to the authorities of Shankara Seva Samiti. Now, they get almost the same amount as the male *purohitas*.

Women who were trained in the Samiti started giving lessons in various houses. They taught three batches at a time, and made the concept of '*Lady purohita*' popular. Originally, women took up this task almost as a hobby, but those intending

to add to their family income also did well. This training extended to some ten districts in Maharashtra. In the last decade (1986-96) about six thousand ladies were trained. Currently lady *purohitas* outnumber the male *purohitas*. Their families encourage them and society has welcomed this new development. The male *purohitas* tried to criticize and oppose the movement when it began but they seem now to have accepted it.

Following are the benefits accrued from the new awakening:

■The female *purohitas* are easily available.

■The female *purohitas* display more affinity while conducting the various vows and observances.

■In an era of social equality the system helps to reduce the dominance of male priests.

■Women were freed to pursue vedic studies.

The other changing patterns are as follows:

Priests from other castes also came to be trained in certain villages. All the rituals are performed by the new priests.

The various new branches of *purohitya* include: Arya samaji systems — which also claim to be Vedic. Jnanaparbodhini method — they have dropped the unnecessary details, shortened the duration of certain rites like *Upanayana*, *Vivaha*, *Sraddhavidhi* etc. Due to their busy lives, urban people cannot afford to give much time to rituals. So some shortcuts are being sought. Professional priests are very good at cutting the rituals short according to the time available. For example, the usual five days marriage ceremony is now reduced to a day's ritual.

It is also possible to specialise in different kinds of priesthood these days. Today there are Pavamana priests, Rudra-Priests, Shraddha priests, sacrificial priests, and



Photo: **OUTLOOK**

Rigveda recitation priests. In some urban areas like Mumbai or Pune, people even substitute video or audio cassettes for priests. But nothing has generated as much interest as the

emergence of women *purohitas*. Far from provoking any hostility, their presence has been largely welcomed by society and their numbers are growing. □

## *For Reis*

*The ground was silent; this was  
Bad sasil, here  
I kicked at nothing. The sun was hot,*

*Too hot for walking in the first place,  
But we walked , ending  
Up alongside the railroad track*

*That hadn't been worked  
In twenty years  
This was my old man's time-nobody rides*

*Now, when there are so many other  
Sensible choices  
You raised your hand, to shade your eyes,*

*And I stumbled . Bad rockes  
And little all round  
You didn't seem to notice, and I didn't talk,*

*But I knew that we had gone  
Far enough, I knew that we are the same, but  
You, not knowing, simply turned back*

**Rhonda C Poynter**