

Making Life More Meaningful —An Interview With Rinki Bhattacharya

These are extracts from an interview taperecorded with Rinki Bhattacharya in January 1984. Rinki began corresponding with Manushi about two years ago and would send an occasional report about events organised by women's groups in Bombay. Her letters were full of energy and vitality so that in my mind I pictured her as a young woman fresh from college. Therefore, when I met her for the first time in Bombay at a meeting at the Women's Centre, I was pleasantly surprised to see that even though Rinki is the mother of three grown up children and is not as young in years as I had imagined her to be, she is young in spirit, indeed, a woman who is just beginning her life. This I found all the more remarkable after hearing the story she had to tell.

Rinki is the daughter of the legendary film director, Bimal Roy, of 'Madhumati', 'Sujata', 'Do Bigha Zamin', 'Bandini' fame. She is married to another well known film director, Basu Bhattacharya, some of whose better known films are 'Avishkar', 'Anubhav', 'Grihpravesh', and 'Teesri Kasam'. In this interview Rinki describes how she came to choose Basu Bhattacharya for a husband and how she was compelled to walk out of her marriage. She is now filing for a divorce on grounds of extreme cruelty.

Throughout this interview, I was deeply touched by Rinki's sense of dignity and by her lack of bitterness despite such a harrowing experience of married life. What seems most inspiring is her decision to speak out about her life so openly, even at the risk of facing more alienation and hostility from those she cares for, and her willingness to risk becoming a target of the cheap scandal mongering that is so typical of anything connected with the film industry.

*Today, her struggle is no more only a personal one. She sees herself as part of a much larger struggle of women in India. She is an active member of the Women's Centre in Bombay.**

How many years have you been married and why have you decided to break off at this point?

This would have been the twenty first year of marriage. I don't think the marriage has survived. I was always under the impression that if I confessed that my marriage was not working, it would be an admission of failure. I did not know where I had failed.

I have been a full time housewife and mother and, in between raising the children and doing the housework, I have found time to be a freelance journalist.

Over the last two years there has been a growing restlessness in me. I think it began when, in 1980, we moved to a new house which is very similar in appearance and character to the house where I was raised. The moment I stepped into this house, I became aware of reaching my roots again. This was also the moment of realisation that there was something terribly wrong with my

marriage, and that this marriage was not going to work, though I had singlehandedly tried to make it work.

I also became aware that there was something more I wanted to do and establish in life apart from a relationship with my husband and children.

Why don't we begin with your childhood upbringing, and the atmosphere in your family?

I was born in the city of Calcutta and received my primary education there. My father belonged to a feudal family of East Bengal. They came as refugees to Calcutta just before the partition, and my father was married to my mother in Calcutta. My father, his mother and his brother came away to Calcutta because they were thrown out of their *zamindari*, and were cheated of their property by the other members of the joint family.

My father began working as a cameraman in the legendary New Theatre productions with Promathesh Barua. We

had a lovely joint family. We lived modestly. I have seen my father struggle. But there was no bitterness or stress in the atmosphere. My father's elder brother happened to be married to my mother's sister. My mother comes from a very educated family. Her father was the private tutor of the Maharaja of Benares. My parent's marriage was something like a love marriage.

We had a beautiful childhood in Calcutta. Sometimes, my father would send for us to go and see the studios after shooting. In those days the studios were charming places. There were fishponds and birds and beautiful gardens. It was like a fantasy world for us. My sister and I were pampered very much by my father's colleagues. We were not aware of any glamour in that life but I was aware of something which was not day to day life, that was my father's life.

We were three sisters and a brother but while in Calcutta we lived in a big

joint family with cousins and so on. My father was a great disciplinarian. Very often, I tell my children that I was slapped only twice by my father. Being the eldest daughter I was very spoiled. One day, when I was about three or four years old, I didn't like the food so I threw a tantrum and threw the rice on the floor. At that moment my father entered the house and he saw the rice on the floor. This is supposed to be a bad sign in a Hindu house because rice is considered sacred. He asked my mother who had thrown the rice and she replied :“Your spoiled daughter.” He gave me a stern look and then gave me a tight slap. He said “Remember that there are people in this

world who don't even get this to eat.” Believe me, Madhu, I have not wasted a grain of rice since then. I was told that he slapped me on one other occasion but I don't remember it.

In 1950 we shifted to Bombay when my father was invited to make a film for Bombay Talkies. The Calcutta film industry had suffered due to the partition of Bengal so many film directors moved to Bombay. We were shifted to coeducational English medium schools, after which I was sent to a convent school. There was talk of sending me to Santiniketan where my uncle was a professor since the time of Tagore. All my cousins have been educated there,

because it was considered the best place to study.

But my father was too fond of me and my sister so he could not think of sending us so far away.

When we came to Bombay, my father's colleagues often stayed with us until they found a place. It was an open house. We had a beautiful family life. It was a very close knit and large family.

What did you aspire to do and be in later life?

I don't think I can specify what I wanted to be but I was aware that language was my area of expression. I was an avid reader and I used to read almost continuously—first Bengali books and later English books. This reading habit has stayed with me and has stood me in good stead.

How did you happen to meet Basu?

I met him some time in the early sixties. He worked with my father in just one film, *Parakh*. But before that, he used to hang around the house. My mother was a kind of *bhabhi* to him. She liked to treat bachelors to good food and to talk to them. Our house was an open house. If she cooked something nice she would send for her favourite “brothers-in-law.”

Basu was a great talker and my mother just loved that. Probably she was a bit lonely those days. My father had become very busy and all the children had grown up. Basu used to come and have long chat sessions with my mother.

I don't even remember when I first noticed him but I think one evening I heard a loud male voice reciting Tagore's poetry on the verandah. I saw this young Bengali, dressed in a typical saffron *khadi* kurta and pajama, a little unkempt. This could be a scene from a Bengali film of the fifties. Something struck me though I didn't talk to him. I had never had a boyfriend. I was the pure romantic kind and believed in all fairytale romances.

Today, in retrospect, I can be honest to myself and say that I was not in love with the man but I was in love with the concept. It was so blown out of proportion in my head that I was trying



Rinki Bhattacharya

to fill a vacuum. It so happened that this man came at a time when this concept was taking shape and he took that form.

I think I was also overly influenced by my father's films which romanticised interclass marriages. It was an obsession with Bengali literature and films in the forties and fifties to show love between people of two different ethnic and social groups. In my father's first film, *Hamrahi*, the class barrier was bridged by love. The hero was Basu's type—strident, outspoken, antiestablishment, spouting speeches.

I don't think it was a conscious choice on my part to place Basu in that tradition but, as I said, he came at that point in my life when I was dying to fall in love. This was the romantic image of love I had. *How old were you when you met Basu?*

I was about 17 when I met him and fell in love but I waited three years to decide and when I eventually married I was 21.

We began to meet clandestinely on my way back from college and so on. We carried on the affair mainly on the telephone. We used to talk for hours on the telephone, discussing social, political, economic issues. It was never silly adolescent love talk. Slowly we began to contemplate marriage. I wanted Basu to go and talk to my parents about this but he kept avoiding doing so. As a result, they came to know about it through rumours and exaggerated reports from other people. There was a big furore and a virtual clamp down on me.

I got a shock when there was so much opposition from my family to the idea of my marrying Basu. In fact his being so friendly with my parents had been a kind of reassurance for me. I did not realise that not every man my parents liked would be approved of as their son-in-law. We had been made aware that it was unjust to value a person for their class and not for themselves. I thought they were being very unfair to this man and I decided to stick by him. I developed a kind of protective feeling even though he is about eight years

older than I am. I think I was trying to prove something, trying to justify the nonexistence of class. I thought I was fighting for justice.

I had always had a good communication with my father though, he usually hid behind a very stern patriarchal image. I was the only one who had a good communication with him. My father refused to talk to Basu. He warned him not to have anything to do with me. Basu offered his resignation. My father tried to make him promise that he would have no contact with me but he refused to promise.

My father became so upset that he stopped going to the studios, a thing he never did even if he had fever. He was making *Bandini* at that time but he stopped work and began staying at home. The atmosphere in the house was terrible, very hostile to me. I started feeling insecure. I was not allowed to go out of the house, not even to my best friend's place. My father got the telephone disconnected. Our relatives and family friends would come to persuade me. The atmosphere in the house was as if someone was dying, very morbid.

One day, Basu managed to contact me and asked me to come out and that day, I did manage to get out. I went in the car because the driver had been taken into confidence by Basu. I went to Basu's house. He was living in a kind of *chawl*. I had been to his house a few times, on my way back from college, but nobody knew that. That afternoon, I just wanted to get out for 10 or 20 minutes. I don't know what happened. I don't know if you'd call it rape but it virtually amounted to that.

You weren't prepared for it?

No, absolutely not.

And you protested?

Yes. But he was physically stronger than I was and he over powered me. I came home in about 15 minutes I was still not aware of the extent of what had happened. I did not know it would have such an effect, that I would become pregnant. I told him what he had done was wrong and I was very angry. He

said: "I don't know what came over me." He was also very tense. After this, my parents stopped me from going to college.

Do you think that the unreasonable opposition from your family precipitated matters?

Yes, it did. It was like being *gheraoed*. I was completely engulfed and suffocated by the opposition. There was not a person who wanted to listen to me. Suddenly, my feelings stopped having any priority for my family. I was not treated like an adult though I was 20 years old. I was stopped from going to college and was sent off to Calcutta.

My BA exams were approaching and I was very keen to come back to Bombay and do my exams. My parents came to know that Basu and I had filed an application for marriage in the Bandra registry. They said that they would bring me back to Bombay only if I withdrew the application. By then, Basu had followed me to Calcutta. Somehow, I was smuggled out of the house and we got married in the registrar's office there. This was in January 1963.

After that, I didn't think twice about withdrawing the application in the Bandra court, so I came back to Bombay and started going to college. My family became very suspicious about my sudden lack of interest in Basu. They sent word to my uncle in Calcutta to find out if I had got married in Calcutta.

By chance, I came across a letter from my uncle to my mother, saying he had checked all the offices in south Calcutta and would be checking those in the north as well. By this time I was pregnant. I was very afraid lest they discover I was married while I was still living in the house. I confided in the land-lady. She advised me to leave the house. So I wrote a letter and I left their house. That is how my married life began.

How did your family members react?

Naturally, there was tremendous shock. I never got to know what exactly their reaction was because I had no communication with them. All I knew was the feedback I got from various friends. My sister was so upset that even today

she refuses to talk to Basu. I was sure of one thing—they were very upset with me. I had fallen in their eyes.

How were the first few months of married life?

The first few months were all right. But what really struck me was that even the day I left home I was not given any spontaneous warmth or attention which I had expected. It was taken for granted: “Well, so now you have come.” Perhaps he was also very upset by the manner in which we had to go about it.

I felt a lack of attentiveness or affection on his part but I was very afraid to analyse this feeling since I had staked everything on this marriage, and I did not want to go ahead with an analysis which would give me an answer which was not suitable for me. That is why I kept on evading it subconsciously.

I got married in January 1963 and I left home in March. I was completely numbed. I think I suffered from a delayed shock effect. Also, I was very lonely. I was used to a large family. Suddenly I was left with only my husband and his friends who were not the kind of people with whom I could mix freely.

We were living in a single room *chawl*. I was very frail and was suffering the discomforts of pregnancy I had to run the house, cook, and do everything. I felt a sense of neglect. He continued living like a bachelor. He would play cards upto any hour of the night. We were never together because his friends were always around. Many of them came to stay as guests.

Though we could barely afford it, there were always people eating at our house, especially young boys who were looking out for jobs.

They became regular invaders. They would be there suddenly at dinner time. I had never been in the kitchen before and now I was expected to play the role of a seasoned housewife. He would say: “OK, there are so many people for dinner”, and sometimes I would have to go without food because these people had no courtesy. They would grab the food and I was too polite to take my share. But I would feel very hurt that my

husband lacked the consideration to enquire if I had eaten.

Their card sessions used to continue very late into the night and I used to wait since I did not want to eat without my husband. Finally, one day, I lost my temper. It was late at night and his friends were playing cards. As usual, I was expected to keep on supplying tea. I was in an advanced stage of pregnancy. At 11.30 p.m., I went and told them: “Look, you are welcome to play cards here but please remember that this is a married man’s house, not a bachelor’s joint, and I have to eat. This is the combined drawing room and dining room. Some of you have wives and it is unfair to keep us waiting like this.” They were very offended and some of them stopped



coming to the house. I had wanted Basu to tell them but since he would not, I had to become unpopular.

Was there anything in the relationship which counterbalanced these negatives?

Well, there were warm moments. I was deeply in love with Basu and I think I wanted to believe that he was also in love with me in the early stages. But his lack of consideration did hurt me. It went against my concept of love and family life.

Was the relationship between you two very different from your parent’s relationship?

Certainly there were tremendous differences. My father treated my mother with extreme courtesy. My mother was supreme in the house. Though she belonged to a generation in which women are supposed to have been more suppressed, she enjoyed many

privileges and freedoms within the framework of the house.

Were you able to move outside that framework?

There was no question of my looking outside because I was at that time so confined with my pregnancy and trying to grapple with the problems of my pregnancy. I was absolutely alone until the end of the pregnancy when Basu called an adopted sister of his. When she came with her maidservant I felt somewhat more secure. Otherwise I was completely alone, with these male friends of his all around. After my marriage, there was a total blockade between me and my family, my friends, my own circle.

Why did you lose touch with your friends?

I became more and more dependent on Basu’s friends. I thought since I was a married woman I must change the whole pattern of social interaction. I looked to his friends and their wives. I did not feel very secure in that circle though, later on, I did become very fond of one family, Dina Pathak’s family. That family became a substitute for my own family.

How were the next few years?

Well, just after my first baby was born, my father fell seriously ill. I was very worried. Very soon, he died of cancer. That brought me more gloom and depression because I felt that maybe I should have been closer to him but I had been prevented from being with him. My mother insisted that he would be angry so she separated me from him. I argued with her and told her she was being unreasonable.

Eventually, I realised that he was not angry at all. He was just deeply hurt. It was not true that he did not want to see me. That was only the exterior, a pretension. Once that became clear to me, I made no bones about being with him. By that time, I was expecting again. In between, I had lost a child.

How did that happen?

It’s a terrible story. I have never been able to talk about it. When my first child was about a year old, I became pregnant. My husband had to go for outdoor

shooting in Bina, a small rural town in Madhya Pradesh. I was in a bad state of mind because my father was ill.

At Bina, we were put up in a railway bungalow with no amenities. Though my husband was the director we were given a room six feet by eight feet in size. I had to sleep there with my son and the small girl who looked after him. There was no toilet. The whole situation started depressing me. I had to use the same toilet which was being used by 40 men of the film crew.

Slowly, I began to be aware of physical discomfort and started bleeding. I told Basu that this was strange since I was two months pregnant. I said I wanted to see a doctor but he said that none was available. In the night, he forced himself on me.

What? Even though he knew you were bleeding?

These are the things I couldn't talk about. And he said: "Don't worry, why are you worrying? People do enjoy sex while menstruating." The next day, he had to go far away on location for shooting. He told me some medical arrangement would be made for me later.

In the daytime I got a terrible pain like labour pain. I told the little girl to see if she could get a doctor or else to call some adult. By that time I had started aborting. I didn't know what to do. I was terrified. My little son was standing there. The girl called the chowkidar's wife who came and held my hands. The abortion took place but the placenta remained inside. A nurse was called. Then I realised that there was a railway hospital across the road. I was absolutely unfamiliar with the place. The pain resulting from this continued for months. When the doctor was called that evening, he was very angry at the unprofessional manner in which the nurse had handled the case.

Four or five days after this, the whole team was supposed to go to Sagar by road. I didn't want to travel so soon as I was not well enough. But my husband said "You will be all right. We will put two cushions for you." So I travelled with them. I became very weak. The next year, I was expecting again though I didn't

want another child.

Could you not have avoided it?

I was foolishly ignorant about sex. And your husband?

He never said anything. I don't think we ever talked about it. It was a contradiction in our relationship. The same two people who could talk about anything under the sun before marriage suffered a kind of alienation when it came to their everyday life after marriage.

Why do you think this happened?

I think my husband found it difficult to accept me on an equal footing yet he knew he had to accept me as such. In his family, women are just there. When I visited my in-law's place, I found his sisters and his sisters-in-law were all utterly bound to the house with no personal life of their own. All of them get up at 4 a.m., and start doing the cleaning and then purify the whole house with Ganga water. The physical labour involved was shocking to me. It struck me as inhuman, the way they worked from morning to evening. At night, the men would come at 11, and the women would eat only after the men had eaten. The men would say with pride: "Oh, *bhabhi*—she will never eat before us."

But I did enjoy the stay though many of their ways were alien to me. I enjoyed being made much of. I thought I should help with the cooking but they said: "Why should you cook, you won't be able to lift the *handa*." Later on, I realised that I was not allowed to enter the kitchen because I was not a brahman. So one day I insisted and I broke the rule. I cooked the lunch and they sort of obliged me.

Did you get on well with your in-laws throughout your married life?

Oh yes, extremely well. They looked upon me as someone on whom they could depend. I always extended all help possible to them. All their communication with my husband was through me. They approached me, not him, for everything. He has no relationship with them.

I was shocked to notice that he never even wrote to his old mother. She would write to me, asking me: "Tell him to write at least once. I, want to see his

handwriting." He is the eldest son. This is how things went on until last year.

Then I sought their help in my problem. I felt they lacked the courage to talk to him or to stand by me. My sister-in-law, who is a warm, affectionate, cheerful woman, wrote to me, saying: "You forget him and come here. We will decide what to do." It was difficult for me to go because of the children's education. But later, when she got to know I had left home, she changed and started writing to say that I should avoid scandal and forgive my husband. She said I should put up with his tantrums because he is a famous man. She keeps on appealing to me, saying: "Forgive him, and forgive me." I don't know for what I should forgive her.

When did he begin to get violent?

I think around 1967. That is when the beatings started. My father died in 1965. As long as my father was alive, Basu never touched me. But he used to beat my son even for little childish pranks. My son was the least troublesome of kids. If he wanted to go to my mother's house or if he couldn't say his alphabet properly he would get a beating. And what beatings! I just can't describe them. My son is a very sensitive child. The beatings upset him so much that he used to bedwet till the age of four.

Over what issues did he start beating you?

Well, he would imagine that I was disobeying him or slighting him. Sometimes, a verbal exchange would build up and end in a beating. At first, it used to be just one slap or two. It would upset me very much. I had put all my creative energy into this marriage and I was not ready to face the fact that it was not working.

He would snub me and scream at me publicly. Afterwards, he would say: "Oh, come on, that is past now, forget it." He never said he was sorry. He used to say: "Two words are totally unknown to me—thank you and sorry." He would scold me if I taught the children to say thank you or sorry. He called it all bullshit, part of pseudo life.

I tried to run away from the fact that I was being beaten. I used to completely erase the memory as you erase a tape. The morning after I was beaten it would be hell, absolute hell. I would feel terribly depressed, rejected. Sometimes I would pour my unhappiness into my diary. My suffering was so deep that I could not find words for it. It would take some days to come out of the depression. But I tried to wash myself clean of this depression by pretending that it did not happen. And I would tell myself : "It won't happen again."

How did it escalate from slaps to violent beatings?

I remember the first time I left home was in 1973. I had made a half boiled egg for him and he was in a hurry to go to work. I brought the breakfast and gave it to him. To my illluck, in the first spoonful he took, there was a bit of shell. He spat it out on my face and gave me such a hard slap that my lip was cut. Then he beat me very badly, saying: "Haven't you even learnt to make a halfboiled egg ?" And he left in a huff.

I was very shaken up, especially because of his having spat the egg on me. Eggs give me a slimy feeling and I don't like slimy things. I could not stand being in the house alone. I went over to the house of a friend who is a lecturer and lives nearby. I really broke down. She saw my lip all swollen up. She said : "This is too much. How dare he? You stay here and don't go home even if he comes."

In the evening, she had to go but she told me not to leave. My mother had rung up to say that my uncle to whom I was very close, had died. Then Basu came in a very repentant mood and said : "I don't want you to be alone when you are feeling so low. Come home." He convinced me and took me home.

At about 2 a.m., he wanted to make love to me. I was revolted by that. He knew I had just lost my uncle. How could he think of this? I tried to knock him off. He held my throat and bashed me black and blue. Basu's brother was sleeping in the next room. I wanted to yell out to him for help. Basu said : "You think he will

help you? He is my brother. I have the power to kill you. You should be grateful that I will not kill you." The next morning, I could not get up from bed.

Often, after beating me up, he would beat his chest in a mad frenzy, saying I had ruined him, ruined his life. He would cry and rave about how miserable he was. In my confusion, I would soothe him, forgetting my own bruises. It was both ridiculous and frightening.

What other forms did the beatings take?

He would twist my arm. He would usually hit me with the back of his hand. He has very heavy, tough, solid hands. He has hit me with his shoes and slippers. At times, he hit me with a hanger and broke it across my back.

I remember one particular incident. A childhood friend had asked me out to lunch. Basu was enraged. He said : "How dare he invite you out alone ?" I was supposed to go out at 12 noon and



around 11 a.m., Basu kicked up a row and beat me up with a hanger which left marks all over my back. Then he compelled me to go and keep the appointment though I felt like cancelling it.

So this way or that, I had no options. I had to take the beatings and next moment, I had to pretend that nothing was wrong. This happened again and again. I would be beaten and then would have to go and say hello to his friends who were sitting in the next room.

The worst incident in my life occurred on the day my mother's guru Mounibaba from Ujjain was to leave town and we were supposed to see him off at the airport. My mother's car was

waiting downstairs and as I went out, the door banged itself before I could shut it gently.. Basu was sitting with his friends. He charged out and said : "How dare you bang the door ?" He dragged me into the bedroom and started walloping me. I was very badly bruised and had a huge black eye. Even while I was being beaten I was aware that the driver was waiting downstairs. I had to tell him to go since I couldn't come. The maidservant came in just then. She took one look at me and bolted. This was one of the worst beatings I got from him.

Basu was afraid to stay home lest someone come and see me in that state. So he insisted that we should go out. He took me to the beach. I was howling away. Because how could I pretend I was not beaten when this evidence was there for everyone to see? How would I face my family? He had lunch out. I couldn't eat. I refused to go back with him to my mother's house. My whole family was there—cousins and all.

When we came home, he went to my mother's place and I asked him to make some excuse but not to let my family see me in that state. But he came back and brought my whole family with him. Madhu, I remember the sight clearly—all of them standing in the doorway while I lay in bed. All they could do was gasp. I was black and blue all over. He would not save me even from that. My brothers and sisters were horrified, Mounibaba saw it too and just stared.

I was not given the option of telling my mother that I was being beaten. She just saw it and she started hating me for it. Maybe she thought I deserved it. Once or twice when I went to my mother's house so as to get a little space, if I would overreact or answer back, she would say: "Oh, you must have been beaten." That was worst of all—that she should pull me up for something which was not my fault. I think if instead of their seeing me like that, I had been able to tell them that this man was doing this to me and I needed help, they would not have felt so alienated from me as they came to feel. The same mistakes continued in my life—my not being able to articulate my

problems, and our exposing ourselves to people.

Do you think this was his way of getting back at your family for the way they had rejected him? Was he trying to show them how much power he had over you?

He never forgave my parents for resenting this marriage. Whenever he got a chance he would rub it in. Even when I was in labour I was not spared this feud between him and my family. I insisted he call my mother. She came to the hospital but she was not allowed to come to be with me. I was torn apart by this high drama of hostility which continued intermittently.

My bad relationships with them were accelerated by Basu's temper tantrums. He used to go and misbehave at their place, scream at them for not accepting him as their *jamai*. For months together, he would prevent the children from going there. He would send back the Diwali or Dashera or birthday gifts sent by them. He would say: "Send it back. I don't want to live on their charity." If I resisted, either I or my son would get a beating.

Sometimes there would be good patches, Basu got round my mother and made her buy our first flat. He is very good at being charming when he wants something done.

Now looking back, why do you think you put up with so much, when it offended your sense of being?

What option did I have, Madhu? Where could I go? I had no job. He kept on threatening to throw me out. Every time we had a violent scene, he would say: "You get out."

That really hit me because I had three kids.

Once in 1976, I did try to put an end to it by leaving home. I went to stay with my sister, in Calcutta. This was totally unpremeditated. The night before my children were to go and spend the holidays with her, there was a huge scene. It was because we had planned to go and eat out at a Chinese restaurant. He kept delaying it until the children were exhausted and very hungry. I got a little

annoyed. Then just as we were reaching the restaurant he said: "Look, I have a little work with Sharmila Tagore. Do you mind if I go and see her first?" I said: "Yes, I do mind because the children are very hungry." He did not go to see her but he became violently abusive. This finished off the children's appetite. They were too terrified to order food. The whole mood was completely ruined. So the next day I too left for Bangalore with them. Basu followed and brought me back.

Till date, he has never offered a holiday or a treat to the kids. It was always I who tried to make him agreeable to come with us. And it would always lead to a scene.

Why did you insist on his coming?

I was very foolish. I thought it would be incomplete without him. And anything I did alone was condemned completely. The only social life I had was with Basu. I never saw a film without him. I never went out anywhere on my own. I've been a total idiot. I chopped off my own feet.

Was there anything at all positive in the relationship?

There were a lot of good patches. Around 1975, after I got my third baby, when I was about 30 years old, I started enjoying my love life. I was in better health. The tension of raising the first two children was over. They were somewhat grown up now and I was mentally a bit free and started getting my confidence back.

He made me feel that I was the most beautiful woman in the world, the greatest. I enjoyed being the supreme woman in his life, I took him at his face value when he said there was no other woman in his life. He made me feel somewhat like a sex goddess, a role which he wanted me to play in the bedroom.

But his need for sex was insatiable. He tried to convince me that a woman like me needs to sleep with a man at least three times a day. He tried to convince me that it was my need. At first, I took it lightly but later it started bothering me, because this is not the way I think a relationship can prosper.

But do you think he sought other sexual outlets?

I don't know. I am not suspicious as a person and I thought I had to have enough faith in him to continue living together. So I chose to be blind and to overlook if anything was going on. But it is more than probable he has. I have had no relation with him for the last two and a half years. It is impossible he has remained celibate. Before my marriage, one of the fears my parents had was Basu's reputation for being a ladie's man. Some claimed he was married earlier! I was up in the clouds and treated all this as unfair character assassination which parents use to dissuade their daughters.

Did both of you ever sit down to discuss your problems?

No, never. He refuses to discuss. He does not think there is anything wrong with him. If I tried to discuss it would lead to further assaults. So I learnt to hold my tongue. I went to psychiatrists because I was suffering from extreme depression. They tried to treat him through me because he refused to go and see them. One of them suggested I get out of the house and go for a holiday. So I took the children and went to Hyderabad. I was absolutely broken in spirit. We stayed in a hotel for about eight days, That was the first time I left home like that. Otherwise, I never went anywhere without Basu.

One doctor said: "Basu will never admit there is anything wrong with him so we have to counsel you to handle him and how to avoid these violent situations." He advised me to take refuge by locking myself into a room when I saw Basu was about to blow up. This is what I started doing. It was only in 1982 that a therapist finally suggested that probably the only solution, was separation. That was the first time anyone suggested separation.

Had you not considered it before?

Not really. I knew I could go and stay with friends for a day or two or at most a couple of months but I knew that would not solve my problems. I was trying to search for ways to put an end to the problem for good but I didn't want to put an end to my marriage.

What did friends suggest?

Oh, they used to say : “It is very wrong of Basu. He must be having tremendous problems.” They tried to analyse his behaviour. Every body kept sending me back to the marriage, back to my home. That is where my place was.

Did you have any control over money?

I was dependent on him to give me money. There wasn't a month in my life when I did not have to humiliate myself by asking for money. He knew he had to give me household money, but he used to rub it in that he was the giver and I had to play the role of the oppressed and really beg. He even said: “You should learn to beg from me.” He used to mock at me because he thought I was asking in a very “superior” manner.

I was amazed at his lack of grace because I was asking money for the house, not for myself. I had denied myself any kind of luxury. I used to manage with one pair of *chappals* while he used to buy himself five pairs each time he went to Calcutta, and all those pairs would rot. He indulged in this kind of excess in everything. He drinks a lot and smokes 555 or Dunhill cigarettes. Often, he would not give me sufficient money for the house. To tide over the crisis I would earn something from freelance journalism.

How did you start doing this?

We had friends working in newspapers who encouraged me to write. I became a correspondent for Amrita Bazar Patrika. I began to earn about Rs 200 a month. I needed that money.

Did you ever have a joint account?

No.

Where did he put his money?

In his account.

Did you have any knowledge of it?

Yes, I knew. I used to often go and deposit cheques.

Did you have any control over it?

No.

And whom did the house belong to?

One portion of it is in my name. I paid for that portion with some money that my father left me and some money that I got by selling a small flat that my mother gave me as a gift. The flat is in

his name but I paid about one third of the money.

How did you come to the point of living separately?

Since August 1982. I started sleeping in my daughter's room. I decided to do that after his very insulting behaviour one night. He woke me up at about 3 a.m. and tried to make love to me. I was very tired and not well so I said : “Please leave me alone, I want to sleep.” He just towered over me and put on the light. Then he said : “I have a right over your body Yo u are my wife. I need sex to sleep. If you refuse I'll bring another woman into this house.”



I felt like screaming but I got up and handed him the car keys and said : “You can go and pick up any number of women, Basu. My body will be given when I want to give it. I may be your wife but if that is all you want from me, consider me dead from today. I am not there. Just get out.” He left. I couldn't sleep in that room. I went and slept on the sofa. At about 6 a.m. he came back and said: “You should not be sleeping here. Please forget it. What will the children think if they find you here.” I said : “Let them think anything. I am not going back to that bed again.”

From that day I left that room for good. That room oppressed me and I couldn't sleep in that bed again. I began to sleep in my daughter's room. He couldn't take this rejection. He would disturb me in the night and try to sleep with me, when my daughter was right next to me. If I locked the door he would bang at the door and shout : “How can you lock doors? From whom are you protecting yourself in this house?”

One day he created such a scene that I came out and said : “What do you want?” He said : “Oh, come on now, you have had enough. Why are you still angry with me?” I said : “I can't sleep with you. I don't love you any more. This body is not available to you any more. Even if I die without sex I will not give you this body.” And I stuck to that ever since, no matter how many tantrums he created.

How did your children react to these scenes? Did they ever try to intervene?

They used to get very upset. My daughter used to get sick and start vomiting. When we had arguments the children always used to shut me up. They would say : “At least one of you should keep quiet.” They didn't want me to be subjected to that kind of torture.

The turning point came one day in 1982, when my son came to my rescue. That morning I had shut myself into my study and was trying to get through an article. I had to meet a deadline so I kept the door closed because Basu makes a lot of noise when he is at home. Basu started banging at the door. I kept quiet and continued my work. The banging became louder. When I opened the door he charged at me and said : “No doors are going to be locked in this house. If you want to lock doors go to your mothers house.”

He grabbed me by the hair, pulled me into the bathroom and started beating me. He took out his kimono belt and said : “I have had enough of you. I am going to strangle you.” I was really screaming, I had lost control of my voice. I got hold of his glasses and smashed them. Then I heard a knock at the door. When he opened the door my son came in. My husband said : “Look at her. She has broken my glasses.” My son said : “You just leave her alone and go out.”

He didn't raise his voice. I realised that the house was full of guests and that had upset my son.

My husband left in a huff and my son took me in his arms. I broke down. He said : “I have seen you beaten up too often. This is no life for you. I'll take a separate flat.”

That day, I realised that if I let the beatings go on I would be destroying my children. They were too confused. Maybe some day my daughter would think this was the way to live and she would allow some man to treat her this way. This really worried me.

We had an elderly friend whom I look upon as a father. I asked him to come over. He was horrified to see me in that condition. I could not talk. He kept on asking me : “Basu beats you up?” Then he said : “You should have left long ago. You are not going to put up with this any more. Just get this man out of your life. Forget about him.” From that time I didn’t feel ashamed about it any more.

In a few day’s time my daughter’s birthday was to be celebrated. Earlier, I would have stopped the party, pretended I was ill. I would have died of shame. But this time I went ahead and had a huge party even though I had a black eye which stayed for three months. Basu thought that I would refuse to go out because my black eye was so evident but I insisted on going out with him and I got great pleasure from making him feel guilty.

It was around this time that I discovered the Women’s Centre. I decided to come here because I wanted to talk and get it out of my system. I could see the disbelief on people’s faces when they came to know that I had been beaten up for years. I wanted to find a place where I would not be disbelieved. I wanted to assure myself that I was accepted and feel legitimate. I wanted to work here. I thought since I had experienced so much I could help other women in similar situations.

When did you make the final break?

I left the house on December 6, 1982. I had gone to my mother’s house. I got delayed so I stayed the night there. When I came back home the next morning Basu started accusing me of spending the night out with some man. He said : “Don’t tell me lies. This is too much. You have

started doing incredible things. Either you leave or I leave the house.” I said : “Fine. You leave the house.” I asked the servant to bring Basu’s suitcase.

He got a bit unnerved. Then he called my son and tried to make a family conference out of it. He said to my son : “Are you prepared to take the responsibility of looking after your two sisters? I think your mother has gone to the dogs, she is a whore. I cannot leave the future of my two daughters in her hands. I will leave the money with you and go in peace. I don’t mind leaving the house. I can live anywhere.”

Very wisely, my son agreed. My husband had expected him to say : “No. no, how can you go ?” But he didn’t say that. I knew that Basu had no intention of leaving the house. Then he started demanding the money he had given me to run the house. I was disgusted so I handed over the money and walked out.

I was shivering uncontrollably. I talked to Smita Patil who was very supportive and then to a lawyer. I went to my mother’s house but I did not tell her that I had decided to leave him because I did not want to hear any negative reaction at that moment. I told my brother. He said : “Whatever your decision, we are with you. Just decide.” That was what I was really thirsting for. This little support did tremendous things for my spirit.

And now how are you living? What is the present arrangement?

There is no arrangement as such. I am living in that portion of the house which belongs to me. It is in my name and was bought with the money given by my parents. And I am being allowed by this man to eat in the house.

He keeps on taunting me, in front of the servants, saying : “You should be ashamed that you are still living off me.” He has completely stopped giving me money. I have to borrow from the servant at times. This morning, I had to ask my little daughter to ask the servant for Rs 10. Basu gives money to my daughter but he makes her feel awful.

He takes away the typewriter. He does not let me touch the phone. I live there like a prisoner of war. He cannot throw me out because I will not allow him to throw me out.

Why do you continue living in that house?

Because that is my flat. I know if I say I don’t want anything from him things will be much simpler. But I don’t have a job. I am looking for one. I don’t want to let him intimidate me like this. He is free not to pay for my food but he has to pay for the children. I want him to come to a settlement.

Till then, where do I stand? Where do we women stand? Since he is in the film industry he can easily say that he is not earning nowadays and can wash his hands of me.

Also, what about the custody of the children? I believe a mother loses her right over a male child when he is seven. Which mother would want to lose her children?

And ever since I have made up my mind to leave Basu, he has resorted to the foulest means to undermine the confidence of my children in me. He has stolen letters from my desk and has shown them to my daughter as proof of my “infidelity.” My mother told me that he went and told her I want a divorce because I have a secret lover. He does not hesitate to tell these blatant lies even to the Women’s Centre members. He said to them : “Ask Rinki why she did not think of leaving me all these years. There must be a reason.”

Can you see yourself starting to live with him again if he promises to reform?

No, I can’t see that happening. I don’t think he intends to keep these so called promises. When I came back home after months my daughter told me : “Baba says he will never beat you again.” As recently as last March he made another abortive assault.

My only regret is that I could not walk out when the children were younger. Today they have become victims of his paranoia. He tries to confuse my daughters and tells them sob stories of how terrible his life is,

how much he loves me, how guilty I am of not trying to understand him, how he has to drink because of me.

He is overwhelmed with self pity. He says : "I am the man who made movies about saving marriages and my own marriage is in bad shape." He sees it as the greatest irony that has hit him, little realising that he is responsible for it.

Well, in his films he does seem to be preoccupied with domestic crises but the marriages usually are saved by the woman bending softly and responding to the husband's expectations, aren't they? In 'Avishkar' for instance, the problem is resolved in a morning scene but I get the feeling that the crisis could explode all over again at night. The resolution does not seem real to me. It seems like a repetitive cliché. Is that the pattern your life followed!

Yes, *Avishkar* is the most auto-biographical of his films. It was shot in our house. My saris were used. Some of the scenes were straight out of our life, out of our courtship period, for instance, the way the girl is caught, the confrontation between her husband and her father. The scene of the physical assault on the wife is also similar to confrontations between us. The way the wife holds on to her ego. She doesn't let him walk over her in triumph even when she is beaten. Though of course he does not show the full round that such assaults took in real life. All his films end in a very simplistic way, with a happy resolution.

Anubhav was not autobiographical but was a didactic extension of Basu's theories about how marriages can be saved. Parts of *Grihpravesh* were also shot in our house and I had to do the decor. What Basu was trying to say there was that the wife can also be the beloved. This was his pet theory.

What exactly does being a beloved mean in real life?

I think he means that the wife remains sensuously attractive and capable of seducing the husband even years after marriage. The husband and wife should treat each other as lover

and beloved. Being a husband and wife is a degeneration of that relationship. That is how he sees it.

Now that you have left, how does society see you since you no longer have the status of being his wife but are a person in your own right?

Freeing myself from this oppressive relationship is like getting out of years of captivity. I know I run the risk of further alienation but nothing can be worse than what my marriage had become.

I don't have much to do with society. But most people are openly suspicious and incredulous when they see a woman who wants to leave a marriage without a career or a man to fall back on. A famous actress, known to our family, counselled me: "Why must you divorce him? You don't have a man or a career waiting for you." Basu has been trying to blackmail me with the help of the letters he stole from my desk. If he continues to malign me in this fashion I may have to sue him for defamation.

I have not met anyone who has made any vulgar signal to me. But recently a young boy, my husband's colleague, rang me up and suggested that I spend a weekend with him. I was shocked. How could he have the cheek? If it wasn't on the phone I might have hit him. This is so typical—the lack of courage in men, their eagerness to strike when a woman is most vulnerable. Even in the worst marriage a woman has a certain status just by virtue of being married.

But I think I can tackle such situations. I travel alone at any time of night. I have never feared that a man might take me for a ride.

I am ready to face life on my own. Only, I want my children's support and their understanding. I don't tell the gruesome details of my marital relationship to my kids. I could confide only to a therapist. So, seeing me mocked at every step and abused, physically and emotionally, the kids are confused and have serious doubts about me. My son thinks I am abetting in crime. My older girl too has been

brain-washed about my "character", and has built up a resistance to me. She thinks I am guilty. I do get depressed by her hostility but I think some day she will respect my decisions and will understand me.

Does the thought of the scandal in the film industry bother you?

What is there to be scandalised about? This man has been beating me up and everybody knew about it. What could be worse than that? So if people now say that the marriage has not been working— yes, it is a fact.

And yet, it will be very painful to see all this in print. I don't know what my reaction is going to be. I have in my own way tried to bring out all these things indirectly through my writing. I would much rather all this came out in a more creative manner.

What are your plans for the future? How do you see your life five years from now?

Basically, I am a great optimist. That is the reason I have survived. My future is geared to that of my children. I would like to build a life away from all this. I aspire to write, to do some creative work, maybe make a film. Next year, I'll be making a film on my father's life. I am looking forward to directing a feature film. I don't know if I am capable of it but I think I will give it a try.

One would think that since you have seen so much of batterings you would want to stay far from the thought of them. How come you are working at the Women's Centre where you come in contact with women suffering similar tortures?

It is part of my nature to extend help wherever I can. And I think without seeming to be magnanimous, and I don't want to be any kind of fashionable social worker, I really want to try and build a support system for women. Despite everything I went through, I am so privileged. So, apart from building a life for myself and my family, if I can put my life to some use I think I will find it meaningful to live. □