

# Struggling To Change Morality

ON June 26, at 5.30 p.m., four women entered a shop called Universal House of Music situated at Yashwant Stadium, Nagpur. They had come to remonstrate with the shop owner, Vilas Udhoji, for having filed a false case against his wife, Lata. Vilas behaved very rudely and called the women filthy names. One of them began to hit him with a sandal. A crowd of about 500 people gathered and when they heard the story, they rushed to beat Vilas. The intervention of some social workers saved the situation for him.

Why were the four women so enlarged? Lata Kamat had been working in Vilas Udhoji's shop for over a year. Vilas promised her marriage and a relationship grew. Lata conceived and Vilas asked her to abort but she refused. After a lot of hesitation, Vilas finally married Lata in November 1983, when she was already four months pregnant.

Vilas and Lata started living in his parents' house. After three months, Lata went to her mother's house for the delivery. She came to know that Vilas had filed a case for nullification of the marriage on the ground that Lata was pregnant by some other man before the marriage and he had not been aware of this pregnancy. On April 14, Lata had a daughter Samta.

The question that arises is: How was it Vilas could not notice that his bride was four months' pregnant? Is it possible that he failed to notice the pregnancy even while living with her for three months? Vilas began to issue press releases defaming Lata and disowning his child. He disregarded the pleas of Lata's family that he divorced but should not indulge in this mudslinging and lying campaign. They came to know that Vilas was trying to arrange a second marriage for himself. It

was at this point that Lata and her three friends went to talk to him at his shop. Vilas filed a complaint with the police who registered an offence against the women and a journalist who had taken photographs.

A number of social organisations convened a meeting the following day, June 27, and formed a Lata Udhoji Abhinandan Samiti. Many prominent intellectuals, journalists, doctors, lawyers, youth leaders and 33 organisations joined the committee. On June 29, a public meeting was organised for Lata in Nagpur university. The speakers congratulated Lata for daring to take action in public against her husband, though she knew that fingers would be pointed at her. They said that in such situations, most girls suffer in silence. The action of Lata and her women friends was a challenge to the patriarchal, male dominated culture.



**Women remonstrating with Vilas Udhoji**

This sparked off a lot of discussion throughout the city. Some people accused the committee of felicitating Lata for promiscuity and for thrashing her husband. The committee has been staging street plays on the issue in different parts of the city, and organising demonstrations outside Vilas' house and shop.

—Sham Manav