

# Women & Relationships

# She Wants

# More

■ By Shefalee Vasudev

*A bird doesn't sing because it has an answer; it sings because it has a song.*  
—Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Birds Sing*

Not all birds sing for the same reason. A poet will say a song is a melodious expression of joy. But ask an ornithologist and he will say migrating birds sing to keep in touch with their buddies while mating birds sing to entice. Some trill because of lurking danger, others shrilly declare their nesting territory. Many sing because it is spring.

It is spring in the lives of Indian women. Of the subtle, savage, submissive or scheming women. The young, old, jovial or grieving women. Working women or at-home moms. Despite huge disparities in thoughts and fates, the need to express lingers on all lips. Especially in relationships, the conventional touchstone that defines women. When the women's movement was a sleeping giant, their worth was measured by selfless love. Romantic or family love, love for the slave or the master, love of power, country, God. In the words of the 13th century poet Amir Khusrau: "*Chaaron ore woh thaali phiray, moti usse ek na gire* (The platter is circulated yet no pearl drops from it)."

But the past decade of social turbulence in India has made a new way for women—outside the constant tests of fine balance—giving them a new self-worth. They have begun to see

relationships as dialogues, not as a dictating religion. In 2003, accidental heroine Nisha Sharma left her marriage mandap protesting against dowry but it was only in retrospect, as she admitted on the Oprah Winfrey show, that the renewing strength of her decision seeped into her soul. Call it poetic justice, women have become insatiable. They want more love, sex, money and respect but also commitment, care and sensitivity. For most, late marriages and postponed motherhood signify the need to ponder on the value of relationships.

In marriages, women point out it is difficult to love a jailer, even less a judge. Of the divorce cases filed every year, about 55 per cent have women as the primary petitioners. As daughters, they understand that their responsibilities rise above inheritance rights. Lighting of the father's funeral pyre by a daughter, now not so uncommon, is a deeply symbolic change. At once, it blurs many boundaries—social, emotional, religious and familial.

In 21st century India, it is not easy. The fine print on the women's emancipation banner is a revelation. In *Stepping Out: Life and Sexuality in Rural India*, Mrinal Pande documents how unscrupulous men dominate all decisions about women's physical and mental well-being. Anything unconventional is libellous. Even a life-saving, legal abortion done at a health centre. In India, an estimated 5,15,000 women die every year in maternity-related deaths and 15 million women suffer from injuries, infection and disabilities in pregnancy or childbirth annually, the highest in the world. Female literacy in India is just 54 per cent and the sex ratio is on a threatening decline. But against the odds, rural women are creating new constructs. Thirty per cent more women

AS MORE WOMEN TAKE A RAIN CHECK ON MARRIAGE AND MOTHERHOOD, IT IS A SIGN THAT THEY ARE FINDING THEIR VOICE, STARTING A DIALOGUE AND SEARCHING FOR AN EQUAL MUSIC



Illustration by NILANJAN DAS

## Marital rights and Wrongs

**1983:** Section 498 A of the IPC makes "cruelty by husband or relatives of husband" a non-bailable offence. It is an amendment to the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 under which giving and receiving dowry is an offence.

**1986:** The Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act maintains that a divorced Muslim woman is entitled to maintenance by her husband if she is unable to provide for herself. It follows the Supreme Court's controversial verdict on the Shah Bano case.

**1987:** After Roop Kanwar commits sati in Deorala, the Rajasthan High Court passes a state Act, which in 1988, becomes the Indian Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987, making sati, committing, abetting or glorifying it, a crime.

**1997:** A Bombay High Court judgement states that a Christian woman can seek divorce on the grounds of "physical and mental cruelty". Earlier, according to Section 10 of the Indian Divorce Act, she had to prove that her husband committed adultery, in addition to other charges.

now report rape and domestic violence as compared with the figures 10 years ago.

In cities, freedom comes in an enticing but tricky package. It is worst for the ordinary middle-class women who watch liberation as a spectator sport on TV chatshows or in ads of friendship clubs, but have no means to participate. For the privileged, there are other traps. Feminism itself has become an enslaving activity: instead of a fair fight for rights, it has become a furious battle. In the name of empowerment, women are misusing power and repeating the blunders of men, skewing their own goals. Section 498 A of the IPC, introduced as an amendment to protect women against cruelty, has become notorious as a revenge tool. In response, many are distancing themselves from the crusade. Ask Naina Kapur, the lawyer behind the Supreme Court's Vishakha guidelines of 1997 on sexual harassment. Kapur, now an educator, has put activism behind her because she feels the women's movement has become a battle of anger, not rights.

On the other hand, the beauty market, flamboyant in India's mall culture, forcibly fuses female beauty and sexuality, two very different values. But through a wet, sparkling lipstick that imitates female lips parted in desire, they are sold as one. The lust that parades as beauty in ads and music videos leaves women aspiring for the cosmetic instead of the real. Mallika Sherawat and her item brigade are like living mannequins, simpering and moaning for the lights, professional set pieces that reveal nothing about real sexuality. But an Arundhati Roy, who embodies the sex appeal of the flesh-and-blood contemporary woman, has few wannabe clones. Many years ago, in *The Beauty Myth*, American writer Naomi Wolf wrote that pornography and the beauty market would put pain, guilt and shame back in women's lives. In India both these businesses are now on an ostentatious growth curve. Add the new predator, the spy cam, and it will be a long time before women can forget that in the body bazaar, the female is, after all, a commodity.

Amidst all this, if the lives of some women are the stuff that stories are made of, it is a song sung true. If women are learning to live with their choices; if the remarriage of widows is being noted as a cheerful change; if urban women are willing to take voluntary HIV tests between sexual relationships; if shelling peas, nurturing babies and managing a police station are no longer soft or hard options, a new aria is being composed.

The idea is not to search for the bird, but to listen to her song. ■