

## **New Life for Bedia Girls**

*Sadhna Pathak*

Patharia, a village-situated in the Bundhelkund region is stark contrast to other villages. Inhabited by the Bedia tribe, a part of the vimukta jati where adult members in the family never worked and depended solely on the earnings of the young girl involved in prostitution.

In this tribe girls are pushed to flesh trade immediately after puberty. Elders rationalise this practice as a fait accompli of the Bedia girls. The village set up two hundred years back in an isolated corner of the region with a deliberate design so that the girls could be easily bought and sold by the affluent. Moreover, the purpose was to keep them away from the corrupting influence of civilised society.

In the late 19th century during the British rule, attempts were made to control the Bedias. This led to them being deprived of traditional occupations like robbery, hooch making and touting. Eight hundred people from Bedia tribe were pushed to this rocky village sans water and agricultural land.

Traditionally a farming community, the feudal zamindari system and failing land productivity gradually forced this tribe to feed on prostitution. Thus, the birth of the girl child became a cause for celebration in Patharia as this meant a steady source of income for the family by her service to the zamindars. In the village there has been no female infanticide as a girl child means lucre. A boy is in fact considered a liability.

However, girls as young as 11 and 13 are forced to go out for earning. This revolting existence appeared in sharp contrast to the neighbouring countries where people were sending their girls to schools. When girls from other villages were sent to schools, most of the villagers put harmonium over the head of their little girls and tied ghungroo on their feet.

But one day things changed. Champa Ben, a sarvodayaite who has worked with Acharya Vinoba Bhave set up Satyasodhan Ashram in Patharia. Initially, she used to conduct regular prayers, bhajan and satsang under an old tree in the outskirts of the village. Her austere life earned the love and compassion of the villagers.

Endearingly called Didi, gradually she made friends with some of the families. In the village she managed to get a small room. She moved door-to-door to educate the villagers. At times while talking to the villagers in their huts till late at night, she would sleep there. Through education, she convinced the male members of the family to do intensive farming and with better production of cash crops like soyabean, they are earning more. She succeeded in persuading the Bedias to send their daughters to schools.

When she opened her first school in the village, most of the children admitted in the school had gone through a traumatic phase in their childhood. Children's tainted past abounded their lives. Innocent yet tarnished, longing for parental love, all these children found solace in Champa's asharam. Soon Bedia children come from Gwalior, Morena, Bhind, Sagar, Hatiam districts of MP, Agra in UP and Dhaulpur in Rajasthan live, play and struggle together. Social empowerment through education has helped them to live with self-respect. Now parents no more force their daughters to attract clients through dancing or prostitution for earning.

Champa's crusade against the coercing of girls into flesh trade started taking a shape of a movement when after centuries she could perform proper marriages of Bedia girls. In the initial stage she faced stiff opposition from the villagers. But with time the disenchantment against the prostitution started brewing up in the minds of the Bedia girls. Their anger forced the adult members of the village to realise that they were doing something wrong. In fourteen years since she came to Patharia, Champa Ben has performed marriages of hundreds of Bedia girls in the age group of 14-16.

Bedia's practice of pushing the daughters to flesh trade was socially sanctioned through the rituals known as nathni utherna (taking off the nose ring) or saar dhakwana (covering of head) were performed. It symbolised the stepping out of childhood innocence into complex womanhood. This marks the beginning of their existence as commodities exclusively for consumption of menfolk. Besides this, Bedias have a tradition that girls once married are not permitted to dance or attract clients for money.

"In 1985, a girl came to Champa didi that she loved a boy but could not marry as she had been already attracting client for eking out a living that meant she could never marry. Didi told her not to worry. She assured her that she would marry her off. She asked the girl to bring the boy to the ashram. She got the marriage performed in a temple and blessed them. When villagers and the girl's parents came to know that she had got married, they burst into anger. Villagers came to the ashram to physically assault her. Didi scolded the villagers and drove them away. Later, she herself went to meet the girl's mother, who was mourning over

her daughter's wedding. Seeing Didi entering the hut, she started slinging nauseating epithets on her. She maintained her cool and hugged the mother. Didi asked the mother did she really disapprove of her daughter's wedding. She told her that if she thought like that then she would go away from Patharia once for all. When she got up to leave, mother's compassionate heart started melting. She hugged Champa Didi and complained that she wanted to snatch away the right of Kanyadaan from us. She further remarked a Bedia girl being married for the first time in Patharia and her unfortunate mother kept away from it,' recounts Shyam Lal, a villager living in Patharia. That was the beginning of the crusade against the pernicious practice. Since then, Bedia girls get married during Basant Panchami festival by applying turmeric.

Now in this village nobody could dare to tease the girls. Liquor consumption has also declined drastically. Village where once the ghungroos of dancing girls echoed now reverberates with the sound of bhajans, shlokas and prayers. Champa Ben earned love and respect to those coerced, abused and exploited for years together. 'To launch a struggle against age-old pernicious practice is not an easy task. It is not merely a project but a philosophy of life whose basis is love. My compassion and love has been reciprocated through boundless affection and reverence of the villagers of Patharia," says Champa Ben.

Champa's own life story is no less inspiring. Born in 1935 in Champa district of Himachal Pradesh. She actively participated in the Bhoodaan movement. She had worked with late Dhirendra Majumdar, a veteran Gandhian. She distributed land undertaken by the Uttar Pradesh Land System Committee. In 1983, when she came to Bhopal she had a chance encounter with men from Bedia community who belonged to Patharia. Then, she decided to start a Satyasodhan Ashram in the village and free the girls from the pernicious practice of child prostitution. Over hundred children study in the school run by Ashram. Fifty percent of the students are girls. Today, many girls of this school are getting higher education in the college run by Kasturba Ashram, Indore.

Many more like Champa Ben in our country are required to provide hope of a better future for the Bedia girls spread over Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and UP.