

MARRIAGE AND CAREER

It was close to eleven when I finished the household chores. The room was cold so I wanted to go to the front porch and read a newspaper while resting on an easy chair under sunshine. I relaxed for a minute when I heard someone ring the bell. Who would that be? Maybe the newspaper boy with a bill or the Coco-Cola man to take back the used bottles. Lazily, I trudged along to open the door.

I saw a new face; she could be a student, say twenty-five years old. She had a file on one hand and a leather bag on the other. I thought she might bore me with some sale gimmick, so I kept the door half-open and asked, "What do you want?"

She smiled and said, "I want you." She was quite a beautiful woman.

"Do you happen to know Mr. Rao?" She mentioned a name.

"Yes, I do," I replied, still suspicious.

"His wife mentioned your name to me. I need a small favor from you. Can I talk – briefly-with you?"

I opened the door and invited her in into the house. I offered her a chair on the front porch under sunshine; I shut the front door and sat facing her.

"Who are your parents?" I asked, and she told me.

"What are you doing now?"

"I am working on a research project in the university; my name is Sujata."

Her eyes blinked like stars when she spoke. Those were not big eyes; still the sparkle accentuated her beauty. She looked like an unmarried woman.

"What is the field of your research?"

"Sociology."

"What's your subject?"

"You are my subject," she said, laughing.

"What do you mean?" My face turned pale.

"You will understand my subject if I tell you why I am here."

I waited for her to continue before she posed another question:

"You are a working woman; aren't you?"

I nodded my head in assent.

"I would like to ask you a few questions. Do you have any objections?"

"Still, . . ." I muttered under breath.

“You must forgive me for wasting your valuable time,” she said, politely. “Still, I need your cooperation for my research.”

“You mean . . .?”

She must have read the suspicion in my eyes. She took out a paper from her file and handed it to me. I read it and returned my gaze at her with a friendly approval.

“The main phase of our research is to gather the opinions of housewives like you,” Sujata was saying. “I am conducting research on the housewives working away from home. Presently, in our country, the practice of housewives with occupation is not widespread. The scope of my research is to examine how housewives are handling their double roles – as a homemaker as well as a career woman; what are the problems they are encountering and how are they coping with them? This is the main thrust of my study.”

“You have chosen a very interesting assignment,” I applauded her. “It may look like an ordinary issue but I am pleased to know your research is on that topic.” I wanted to encourage Sujata on her effort.

“I will ask you a few questions and you have to answer them with no reservation. They will remain confidential and your identity will never be revealed to anyone. I will treat your answers as opinions only – from a home maker and a professional. You may frankly reveal what’s on your mind.”

I cleared my throat as if getting ready when I heard my husband calling me. “I will be back,” I told Sujata and left.

“Who are you talking with – for such a long time?” my husband asked, still lying on his bed. I told him everything.

“Who knows what she’s up to?” he asked in a tone of irritation. “Why didn’t you get rid of her on some pretext?”

“She looks decent and respectful,” I said. “She was sent here by Mrs. Raghava Rao, so how can I refuse? Why don’t you come and join us? You too will know about her.”

My husband dismissed my suggestion with disdain. “Forget it,” he said. “Why should we let our family affairs be exposed to the public? What happens if this interview leads to some awkward situation tomorrow?”

“Good heavens, you are getting paranoid! Why don’t you take a look at her? She also showed me a letter of introduction from her professor. I am educated and also have a career. Don’t you think I too have a sense of what’s right and what’s wrong?”

“Very well, make sure you send her away soon. I can hardly sleep now,” he said and dragged himself to sleep. I smiled, gently closed the bedroom door, picked two *Fantas* from the fridge and returned to Sujata. I handed her one. Meanwhile Sujata got ready with a pen and paper for our interview. Sipping *Fanta*, she asked,

“How long have you been married?”

“We have exhausted four Five-year plans”, I said.

“Only twenty years?” She seemed surprised. She scribbled something on a paper. “How old were you when were married?”

“You are really smart,” I said. “You are trying to find out my age without a direct question!”

“Oh, I didn’t mean to . . .” Sujata began laughing.

“I was twenty at that time.”

“How old are you –now?”

“Forty.”

“Was it a love marriage or an arranged marriage?”

“Neither; it falls in between.”

“How did that happen?”

“Two of our mutual friends suggested this alliance. We gave our consent; our parents had no objection. We had a traditional marriage.”

“How many children do you have?”

“None.”

“I see.” She jotted down, again.

“Who are the people living in this house?”

“Presently, only my husband and myself.”

“How long you have been working?”

“It is almost fifteen years.”

“Did you work before your marriage?”

“No.”

“Did you give up any job in the interim?”

“No.”

“Does your husband approve of your working?”

I was silent.

“Why are you hesitant? Does your husband approve of your working?”

“It was he who encouraged me to take up a job.”

“Are you saying he has been supportive in the beginning but of late less enthusiastic about it?”

“Well, sometimes I do get such a feeling.”

“What motivated you to work in the first place? Why do you want to work, now?”

“At first I had never thought of a career; now I am consciously pursuing it.”

Sujata smiled and again make a note with her pen.

“You say you had never thought of a career; was that the only reason?”

“You may it was a major factor.”

“So, there were other reasons too?” Sujata was posing the question like a lawyer.

I silently shook my head.

“Did you work because your husband was not earning enough?”

“What do you call enough? But my choice had nothing to do with our finances.”

“Did you want to work to supplement your husband’s income and enjoy a more privileged life?”

“That’s never my intention to begin with; still my income certainly helped our family considerably.”

“Did you think of a career to escape any problems at home?”

“No, fortunately that wasn’t the case.”

“Did you choose a profession as an option to meet others for friendship and company?”

“That was certainly one of the reasons.”

“Was your intention to earn a promotion and carve a name for yourself in your professional life?”

“My intention was to make a living; I had no intention of ruling over anybody. I worked hard and gradually moved up in my career; it also brought me merit and recognition.”

“How satisfied are you in your professional life?”

“Generally speaking, I am very satisfied; once in a while, I want to achieve more, and become frustrated if the circumstances are not favorable.”

“You talk of circumstances – are they related to home or work?”

“Both. It so happens that just when you are hard pressed in office you have friends and relatives demanding your company at home. How can a woman handle her tasks - both at home and work - at the same time? Nobody would accept you're devoting the spare time at home to do some office work. Even when there's an emergency at work you can never expect the whole-hearted cooperation from your folks at home. No woman can expect to work hard for promotion just like men do; that's what I was calling unfavorable circumstances.”

“How satisfied are you with your husband’s profession?”

“As far as I am concerned, there's no dissatisfaction.”

“Do you have in-laws around?”

“Yes.”

“Does your father-in-law approve your working?”

“What a question! What are you saying?”

Sujata reacted with a mild laugh. “It is necessary to understand the dynamics of family life – the moods and contradictions of its members – to know how they involve and influence a working woman. Please understand I am not intruding into your personal matters. So, does your father-in-law favor your working?”

“Do you think he would say it in public – even if he approves my working?”

Sujata laughed, again. “I am going to write that he’s in favor.”

“Do you like your mother-in-law?”

“I am very fond of her; I prefer her to my own mother.”

“You are indeed a lucky woman,” Sujata said.

I agreed with her.

“Do you have any cousin-sisters, sisters-in-laws and brothers-in-law? Are the women educated and employed?”

“Two among my sisters-in-law have started business after they got married; another worked for three years and then gave up due to circumstances beyond her control; the wife of my husband’s elder brother is also working. The younger brother is not yet married.” Sujata suddenly bowed down her head; a sudden thought flashed in my mind. Sujata began, again.

“Do you have a sense - that you are missing something in life because you have no children?”

“When I got married, most of the women-folk from my husband’s side of the family were very young, so I never missed the company of children. After all happiness and contentment have to do with one’s state of mind. Some are able to lead happy lives even when they are in need; some feel unhappy even when they are blessed with everything. So the presence or lack of children is not a major issue.”

“What do you suggest I take for your answer? Have you or not found fulfillment in your life?”

“Look at me; what do you think?”

“You look happy and contented.”

“Do you actually think so? You may note down as you wish.”

“How do you and your husband spend your time together? Do you want to stay at home, go out, or do neither? Do you have different ideas of pursuing your interests?”

“This is really a tough question to crack,” I told her, smiling broadly to myself.

“Please crack it open for me.”

“There’s one matter over which we constantly have arguments,” I began. “My husband loves window shopping, I don’t. Unless

there's some urgent purchase to do, I wouldn't think of walking down the bazaar streets straining my legs and eyes. On holidays I would like to go to a drama or a movie, but my husband prefers to enjoy a sumptuous dinner, do some reading and then go to bed. He likes to go for walking – doesn't matter where he wanders. We hardly visit our friends together; once in a while we might think of visiting someone, but would never agree who that friend might be. So we would stay home, each grabbing a book and reading."

"Do you have other activities of mutual interest?"

"Not many I am afraid, except our literary work; I write short stories and he writes poetry."

"Do you share your concerns with your husband?"

"I do, but he would suddenly storm out and scream at me, 'Why did you do such a thing' or 'why do you talk to me like that?' I would beat a hasty retreat and feel distress for many days; I will look for some opportunity to vent out all my pain. We always argue with one another – on both domestic and work issues."

"How frankly do you talk about your personal matters?"

"To the extent I don't hurt my husband's feelings and endanger our family life."

"Does your husband frankly share his concerns with you?"

"He's very candid in talking about our home and other relatives; he would never discuss his work with me."

"Do you feel contented with your husband's affection for you?"

"Well, sometimes he goes over the top; he wants to tell me all his problems. I know he's crazy about me and can't get me out of his mind. He dreads the very idea that I might like to take a trip and go somewhere on my own. I am a grown-up woman – a working woman – can't I take care of myself? But he wouldn't agree. Occasionally I would lose my temper and scream at him, 'Why can't you leave me alone?' but he would simply smile back."

"What're you thinking?"

"I am waiting for your answer."

"I feel fully contented."

"Does your husband feel the same way about you?"

"You must address that question to him."

"But I am interested in knowing only what *you* think."

The young woman is very persistent, I must admit. Still, why should I reveal all my private thoughts to her – even if it is for her research only?

"I think he does," I said openly.

“Do you and your husband have different opinions on the same issues?”

“You might as well ask me if we eat our meals every day!”

Sujata burst into laughter at my comment. She made some notes on a paper and said; “Now I am going to ask you some details; please answer me.” Hasn’t she been asking me enough details? Well, once I threw myself into her web, I can’t pull out. “Go ahead,” I told her. “I have no objections.” I even thought I might write a short story based on her.

“Do you and your husband have different opinions when it comes to spending money?”

“Sure, we do. For example, I wanted to buy a new curtain but he wanted to buy old coins; he’s interested in collecting antiques. ‘Why do you need a new curtain?’ he would ask me. ‘Why waste money? What’s wrong with the present one?’”

“What about entertainment?”

“Well, he’s not fond of anything. He hates movie, picnics, shopping, parties or even card games.”

“What about religious ceremonies and rituals?”

“He dislikes religious activities. In the years following our marriage I was interested in performing the traditional *Varalakshmi Puja*, but he shrugged me off with a sneer, ‘You are an educated

woman, why do you need all that stuff?’ When I was young, during the *Sankranti* festival, I wanted to display dolls at our home, but my father objected saying it would affect my studies. And when I got married my husband had a different excuse: ‘You are no more a girl, why do you need dolls?’ he would say. I insisted that I did want to perform the *Varalakshmi Puja*, but he mocked me: ‘What’s this silliness – turning a coconut into the face of a goddess? I don’t like women flocking around at my home for any worship.’ How can you perform any ceremony at home with such people around?”

Sujata stirred in her seat; was she feeling as if sitting on a seat of thorns?

“Am I boring you with my family affairs?” I asked.

“No, it was I who asked you,” Sujata said, looking embarrassed.

“Do you also have difference of opinion when it comes to your friends?”

“Yes.”

“Your answer is curt and very brief; am I boring you with these probing questions?”

This is really getting hard; Sujata seems determined to look deep into my heart and dig out everything. I muttered to myself, “Once I begin, I would be opening the can of worms.”

“Please tell me, anyway.”

“I always mingle and socialize with my husband’s friends and office colleagues when he brings them home; but he always keeps a distance from my friends and colleagues.”

“What’s the reason, you think?”

“Maybe he doesn’t like to be known he was married to a particular woman.”

“Do you feel hurt?”

“Of course, I certainly do.”

“Does it mean you both have a difference of opinion when it comes to the social status of a wife and husband?”

“How could a wife ever become equal to her husband? Women are destined to be slaves.”

“Do you agree with your husband on this?” Sujata could hardly believe my words.

“How could I agree with him? He would counter me when I talk about equality. ‘I am the elder, you are the younger,’ he would remind me. ‘I am bright, you are dull – how can we be ever equal?’ I shook my head in dissent.

“Does he like to help you around the house?”

“I think no husband ever offers as much help at home as my husband does, but I don’t like his method of working. He wants to

help me in the kitchen but wouldn’t mind dropping the cigarette butts and used matchsticks on the floor. When he dices the vegetables, he invariably drops the rinds and skins all around. I would often like to tell him, ‘Thanks for your help; you better mind your own business.’”

“What do you think of working with your mother-in-law?”

“Whose mother-in-law you are talking about?”

“Of course, I am talking about yours!”

“We both have no problems where my mother-in-law is concerned; but there are occasions when my husband doesn’t see eye to eye with *his* mother-in-law.”

“How does that happen?”

“Well, he thinks, once I got married to him, I must forget about my folks back home. Of course, he doesn’t directly mention that to me. He always wants to keep others at a distance. Sometimes I begin to think that men haven’t changed since the days of *Manu Yugam*.”

Sujata looked bored stiff while writing down a (a comment?) on a paper. Then she asked:

“Do you have any difference of opinion when it comes to expressing love at one another?”

“Well, that happens all the time. I would get mad if he doesn’t appreciate my cooking. And if I don’t admire his gifts to me – a sari or something – he would feel I don’t love him.”

“What words you typically use in intimacy?”

“You are asking about physical love, am I right?”

Sujata was embarrassed and bowed her head down.

“Do you want the truth?”

Sujata felt her cheeks reddening.

‘*Eemay*.’ A call was heard from my husband; I leapt out of the chair and darted to the bedroom.

“*Bujji*, you woke up already?” I teased him.

“I’ve hardly had a wink of sleep,” he complained. “I have only one day in the week to rest and relax at home in the afternoon and it is becoming just impossible! What are you two talking about? I can think of only two sparrows chirping!”

“Why don’t you come and spend some time with her? Meanwhile I shall bring you some *parkoras* and coffee.”

“No, go ahead; finish off your talking with her soon and send her away. Then we both can enjoy the snacks. Why do we need her between us?”

“She does look beautiful. Why don’t we consider her for our Srinivas?” I wanted to lure him into my frame of mind.

“Are you crazy?” he sneered at me, picked up a magazine and slumped back on the bed. I admitted my defeat and returned to Sujata.

“Does your husband always address you as *Eemay*?” Sujata asked me with surprise.

“Yes,” I said.

“You are an educated woman – a working woman. Why didn’t you object to his addressing you in such an outdated manner?”

“I too felt as you do - before marriage; I used to tell my friends that if my husband ever addressed as *Eemay*, I would respond by calling him *Oreey*. Still, when my husband addressed me, the day after marriage, as *Eemay*, I was shocked, but couldn’t do anything. I felt as if he had been addressing me with that word for a long time and the word had a tinge of intimacy for me.”

“Is it not modern for someone to be addressed by name?”

“That sounds too formal – like an outsider addressing by name,” my husband says.”

“Then, he could fondly address you with a pet name.”

“What I need is someone doting on me; what does a name actually matter, anyway?”

Sujata remained silent.

“Still, I haven’t answered your question,” I reminded her.

“Yes, you are right.” She stared back at the questionnaire in hand, and said, “I presume you have no difference of opinion . . .”

She probably assumed that I would be elaborating, so she turned bashful. I was in no mood to unload my story and cause her trouble. She’s looking for succinct answer, why should I prolong it?

“Let’s say you have a fight; would you both calm down and reach a compromise? Or who tones down – you or your husband? Or do you both would turn obstinate and not give in?”

“Every scenario is possible; it would depend on the circumstances.”

“What happens the most of the time?”

“What else a woman could do? She has to give up.”

“What do you think of your husband?” Sujata wanted to know. “Here are some attributes listed for your review. Please mark off your opinions on this paper.” She handed me a sheet.

I began looking at the list.

1. Argumentative.

Yes. Am I less belligerent?

2. Not Broadminded.

Yes. He would enjoy the eggplant curry I make for him; but he would not appreciate when I make the cauliflower Curry I like.

3. Always fault-finding

Yes. He acts like a Supreme Court judge at the dinner table, enjoys a sumptuous meal and then tells me, ‘You are not a good cook.’

4. Has violent temper.

Yes. He gets angry very easily. But it doesn’t last long.

5. Spoils the children?

Fortunately he never got that opportunity.

6. Very secretive.

He’s not really smart in keeping secrets.

7. Is jealous.

Yes. He scowls when I don the sari my father bought for me. He admires only the saris he had bought for me.

8. A big talker

Only with his own friends. Doesn’t have much to say to me.

9. He would cheat on me.

How can you ever trust any man?

10. He’s lazy.

Yes. He’s lazy even to go to the barbershop.

11. Always complaining.

Yes. He ranks first in that category.

12. Not trustful.

Yes. He promised me we would go on a vacation trip to Kashmir; but the very next day, he said he never made that promise.

13. He smokes.

Yes. Otherwise, he says, he's scared of being born as a buffalo in the next birth.

14. Acts indifferent.

Yes. That happens when he's mad at me, but that would last only a short time.

15. Is suspicious.

Yes. The other day a young woman came to interview me, and he sounded very suspicious!

16. Doesn't care.

Yes. He wouldn't mind even if the tap is leaking.

17. Will not accept responsibility.

Yes. When we return home after grocery shopping he would never offer to carry them.

18. He is interested in other women.

The neighbor's wife always looks attractive.

19. Not interested in taking care of children.

He would probably ignore me too even if they were around.

20. Is interested only in his occupation

That's exactly what he accuses me of.

21. Can't take criticism.

Yes. Never thinks he could be wrong.

22. Very anxious; has no patience

He would be alarmed if I come home from work a few minutes late; but he would go crazy if I delay half-a-minute to open the door when he rings the bell.

23. Lacks cleanliness/organization

Yes. He will simply drop books and magazines on the table after reading; he says he doesn't want to tidy up the table because he would never be able to locate things when he wanted them. When I tell him that the whole house looks like a big mess he counters me saying that's how intellectuals live. If I tried to tidy up the pillows and bed sheets – early morning when he's in a hurry to go to work – he will ask me, 'What's the big deal?' I would say 'What would someone say if they see this clutter?', 'Why would anyone come into our bedroom?' he would demand to know. He is always arguing with me under some pretext or the other.

24. He's a gambler

He doesn't even know how to play a game of cards.

25. Enjoys staying home.

Only if his friends are around!

26. Doesn't like to go out with me in the evenings.

He hates shopping but is very fond of walking!

27. Always late for lunch.
Epecially when I am hungry.
27. He doesn't like my working.
He would never say so in public.
28. Tight-fisted.
No, he's extravagant.
28. Open and frank when discussing his problems with me.
How will that help? He never accepts my advice.
29. Gets easily tired while listening to the news about home/neighborhood.
30. *Yes. He says intellectuals are interested in better things.*
31. Not interested in coming up in life.
He has no ambition and he also doesn't encourage me to advance in my career.
32. Lacks grace.
Yes. He hasn't changed even after he had returned from America. He always makes noise when helping himself with buttermilk-rice. If I admonish him saying, 'Why can't you eat silently?' he would reply, 'I simply can't eat without making noise!'
33. Demands perfection in house-keeping.

No, he never talks about it; he couldn't care less if dust keeps collecting on the radio set; I am the one who feels hassled.

- 34 He treats me as his equal.

How would he? I am shorter by two inches

"Why are you laughing?" Sujata wanted to know.

"Well, I am looking at your questionnaire; I wonder if even a lawyer would cross-examine a witness the way you are doing."

35. "Did you ever give serious consideration how you could be different from your husband?"

"I often thought about it; but never tried to be different."

36. "During the last year, how many times do you think you had a quarrel with your husband?"

"I have lost the count. I would say quite often."

"Then, why didn't you want to be different from him? You two seem to have a difference of opinion on many things. How are you able to reconcile with one another – day after day?"

"Sujata, I think you too must get married; you will then understand the special bond in marriage. Things simply don't change when a woman is employed. The couple will always fight with one another and I think it would be the most foolish thing for a third person to interfere in their affairs."

"Do you believe all couples lead happy lives?"

“If you want to enjoy family life you need to cultivate a sense of humor.”

“In the final analysis, what do you feel about your husband? Love, aversion or neither?”

‘Love and respect.’”

“What does your husband feel about you?”

“Love and authority.”

“Do you feel any difference in his love toward you – during the first year of marriage and, now?”

“At first it was infatuation; now it is a relationship nurtured by love and long association.”

“Will you choose him as a partner if you were about to begin a new life, all over? Or would you like to remain unmarried?”

“I will marry him and him alone. Isn’t it the duty of an Indian woman?”

“What does your husband think?”

“He would say ‘No marriage for me!’ Well, he’s a man!”

Sujata put her pen away and the questionnaire in her file.

“I want to thank you profusely,” Sujata was saying. “You have been very patient – answering all my questions – and helping me with my research project.”

“That’s fine. I have finally articulated so many things that were lurking deep in my conscience. I think every person should mull over these

questions; they will help in soul-searching. I owe you a lot of thanks; and, by the way, during our conversation, I suddenly thought of something.”

“What is it?” Sujata asked in excitement.

“You will understand sooner or later,” I said laughing.

(Original title: *Srimati – Udyogini*)