

Women and Mental Health ...a beginning



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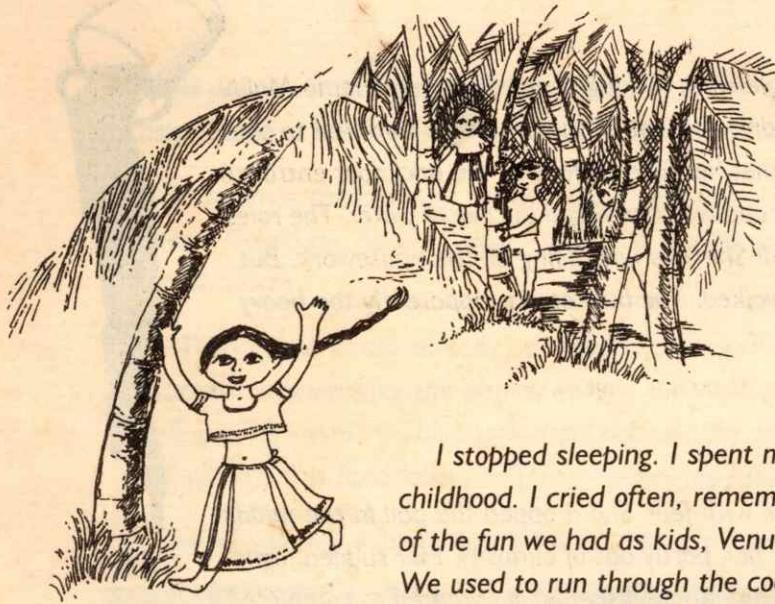
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I stopped sleeping. I spent my entire time reliving my childhood. I cried often, remembering those times. I thought of the fun we had as kids, Venu, Murli, Rajalakshmi and I. We used to run through the coconut groves, laughing at some angry adult. Our pockets were bulging with loot-mangoes, tamarind, guavas... This loot would be enjoyed later, sitting in the corner of the old cowshed. While I ran as fast as I could, I even felt the tail of my plait slapping sharply against the back of my knees. It made me laugh, remembering all the pranks we played.

I lived in the past, especially thinking of my childhood. I dreamed a lot. Sometimes I didn't even realise I was dreaming. I ran through many imaginary conversations and arguments in my mind. They were always with my mother. I would always be the winner. This made me very elated, that I could win sometimes. I laughed and laughed. Sometimes Amma talked to me nicely and told me a story. But even in my dreams, something always went wrong and I ended up unhappy. Dreams were bad. I wished they did not disturb me like that, leaving me with a very bad feeling in my throat and my head.

Days went by in this way. I did not even notice how many. I spun my silken web, which no one seemed to understand. I became lonely. I was engrossed in one or the other thought that gripped me, sometimes talking to myself, and sometimes writing in the sand. In this village where there was no water, there never seemed to be a shortage of tears. I cried a lot. Disgusted, Rishi ignored me altogether.

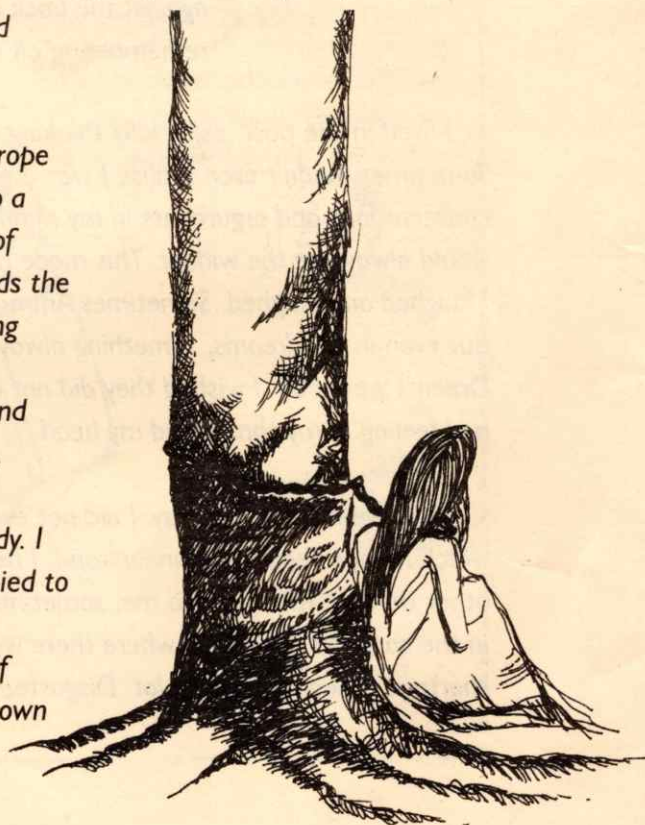
I realised one day that people were looking at me strangely. Hema Malini was avoiding me. She was avoiding me just at the time that I wanted to show her just who I was. One day, I met her face-to-face at the backdoor entrance. She was looking tired and pale and was carrying a bucket of water. The roles had miraculously been reversed! She was now doing all the housework. But she staggered a lot while she walked. The bucket was apparently too heavy for her.

“Look here”, I said.

Seeing me, she became pale with fear. She dropped the pail in the middle of the yard and fled. I ran after her, partly out of curiosity. Her sudden flight was mysterious. Besides, I had not stopped speaking. I wanted to complete what I was saying. She ran into her room and tried to drop the bar from inside. But I was too quick for her. I began pushing the door from the outside as she tried to shut it from within. Suddenly the door gave way. Jumping inside the room I found her, a small and frail looking heap with a big belly on the floor. She was heavy with child! And I had scared her so much that she had fainted!

Someone caught hold of me. They tied a rope noose around my neck. They tied the rope to a neem tree in our backyard. There was a lot of shouting and running feet. People ran towards the village to call for help. Everyone was shouting instructions to everyone else. It was a big turmoil, as they tried to talk to each other and mobilise everyone. They all forgot about me.

Under the neem tree it was cool and shady. I remember feeling suddenly safe, alone and tied to the tree. Strangely, after many days, I slept peacefully under the neem tree. I had myself watered that tree each day. On that day my own strength was contested against it.



But no matter, I thought then. I was I and the tree was a tree. There was no way that I could become a tree and the tree I. If I did become a tree I wondered what my breasts would look like. Would they look like two identical twigs? Yes, but there would be a difference. There would be no leaves or flowers. A small giggle escaped me. I tried to stop it with my hand. This was not the way to behave when there was childbirth underway in the house!

"Stillborn! Stillborn" they all cried. After that, I dozed some more. Rough hands pulled and tied me to a bullock cart.

It was the end. I knew it even then. I remember thinking, it was all because of my hair. Those long tresses were of course entirely to blame. It lay around my shoulders and back in a tangled mass. I had just to tug at it for it to come out in great clumps. Soon the backyard was filled with little tufts of my hair. My head was sore.

We went on our way. Rishi was very angry. Home! It seemed strange, how much the meaning of that word changed over the years. This one too, like the previous, kept growing smaller and smaller behind us. It vanished in the cloud of dust thrown up by the cartwheels.

Rishi's face was hard and determined, his eyes looking straight ahead. His confident sneer had left his face. This gave me much pleasure and I remember giggling throughout our journey. The memory of two tired and haunted eyes kept coming back in a flashback. It was an unpleasant vision. I pushed it out of my head. I could not make out whether they were her eyes or mine, or one of each. Whose ever they were, they reminded me of something... something I could not remember.

I dozed....



Mental health is for everybody

Emotional and psychological well being - or what is called 'mental health' - is about everybody. We all go through periods of mental stress and strain. During those times we may feel that we are 'not feeling like usual'. We may not feel quite up to doing our every day's work and routine, be happy, or play with our children, like usual. Often, a small change in our attitude or our everyday way of life may give us back a feeling of well being. But sometimes, the 'I am not right' feeling may last longer, for days and months, and become profound. It may disrupt our very lives. This is what happened to Rama.

People in the village said that Rama was "going mad". She certainly moved between many levels of experiences about herself. Her life became more inward. She spoke to herself more often, instead of just blindly obeying others. She asked herself more questions. The questions- that inner voice- became louder, more intense, more demanding. She enjoyed, coped, struggled or surrendered in fear to these newer experiences. She lived in the past. She listened to her inner voice, replayed her old dreams, ambitions. But she became more inward, losing connection with the outside world. Her social life became a nightmare.

Should we listen to our inner voices? Do they tell us something? Is mental ill health about these voices and other subtle changes in our self? How do we deal with these changes?

"Is 'going mad' like going to the market or the cinema? Is it an activity that people do - 'go mad'? Does it have any meaning? Yes, I had thoughts that never came to me before. I did things that I never did before. I said things people did not expect to hear from a woman. I was never like this before... before my marriage, that is. My life was good at that time. Appa used to love me very much. No one made me cry. I want to go back to my old life and self."

"I was well at the time. I do not remember having any inner visions or voices. These voices came later, after my marriage. It was a saheli's voice. It told me how bad my life was, my man... how bad he was. I would never have dared to talk about all this on my own. My saheli's voice gave me the strength. But I also do not want to be preoccupied with all this ... with her! If I have to ask a new question about myself everyday, that is too tiring, isn't it?"



People who tear their clothes, their hair, abuse, shout, etc. are called 'mad'. If women remain withdrawn, in their own thoughts, if they do not meet society's expectations, we call them 'insane'. We drive them to the mental hospital. But mental disorder is *not* about whether someone is good or bad. It is *not* about social non-conformity. Mental disorder is *not* about fate, destiny or paying for past sins.

Our attitude to those who suffer from mental disorder is sometimes that of ridicule, insensitivity, impatience and intolerance. We ignore or dismiss what they say as their imagination or as flights of fancy. Thinking that we are being kind, we decide and act on their behalf, as if they cannot think or decide or feel on their own. In this way we make them dependent and childish. People with mental disorder are not irrational or incompetent. They do not carry an omen on their foreheads.

Usually, they are like everyone else. They can talk, walk, act, think and feel. They can marry, have relationships, have children, work and contribute very well to social life. Common mental suffering is not inherited. If a person suffers from emotional problems today, she is not condemned forever. She can heal and move on in life. Through community support, self-help and other ways, we must make this healing possible.



What is mental health?

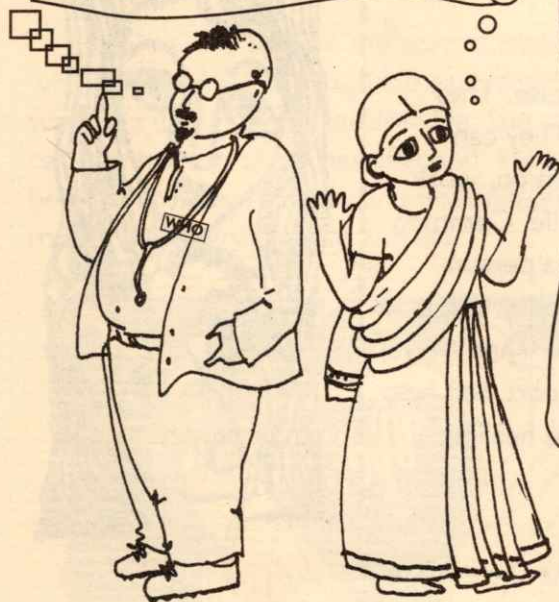
Mental health is the capacity of the individual, the group and the environment to interact with one another in ways that promote subjective well being, the optimal development and use of mental abilities (cognitive, affective and relational), the achievement of individual and collective goals consistent with justice, and the attainment and preservation of conditions of fundamental equality.

What he is trying to say, my friends, is like this: For good mental health, every person's body and mind should be able to work fully and well. Children need to be nurtured, fed properly, and allowed to learn, grow and blossom in their own way. People should love, share and care for each other.

Everyone should have access to health care. There should be no discrimination, no poverty, no greed, no rape or beating, no communal violence or wars.

Everyone should have houses to live, food to eat and places to learn, to work and to play.

Governments must protect the rights of everyone.



Emotional well being is a very personal and subjective experience. It is a way of experiencing oneself, one's relationships and one's world. This state of well being can be the result of various external factors such as good physical and nutritional health, forward looking ways of responding to conflict and stress, equality in personal and social relationships, and an overall nurturing environment. Mental health is a positive balance between individuals, communities, their natural as well as social environment. A notion of equality and justice is integral to mental health.

Rama recalls an interesting story.

"Near my village there was a mining site. The people working there had settled into a large village over a period of time. The total strength of the community was around 7000 people, including the children. They lived in a state of utter panic: They were afraid the roofs of their houses would fall on their heads. Everyday they complained to the authorities. The children also were afraid. They ran out of their huts shrieking. The women kept looking fearfully at the roofs. Some elderly women with prayer beads prayed everyday. Many charms, talismen, scarecrows, lemons and chillies, and painted pumpkins were used to drive away the catastrophe. Most of the men and the older boys slept in the open fields, away from the settlement.



"The community had lived there for several years, since the mining started. Their labourers wandered away from work because of this problem. The authorities were very concerned, but only about the money being lost. The contractors, the suppliers and manufacturers were unhappy. The male labourers wandered away and came

back silently in the night. The women could not wander away and so they had to face the anger of the authorities. They also had to put in extra hours to compensate for the absence of their men. Big doctors were brought in to cure what were called the 'hard cases'. These people had become totally silent or paralyzed with the fear. Children and women suffered the most. Some NGOs came and gave brief counselling. The city doctors came and gave medicines, which helped for a few days. But soon they were back in their old state, shivering and muttering and waiting for the walls to fall on their heads."

This small community was constantly subjected to the ear-shattering din of mining activity. Often the walls of the huts developed small and large cracks. Their everyday life was rivetted by constant noise and vibrations. The land they were staying on was unstable. Repair work was always on as some houses actually collapsed.

Every time the earth moved, their hearts would skip a beat and then race faster. They broke out in a sweat. Their eyes dilated. Their bodies became very stiff and tense. The muscles tightened. The small hairs on their neck, arms and legs prickled and stood up. Their fingers tightened into fists. The chest seemed to grow smaller. It became suffocatingly tight, as if there was no space inside. Breathing was difficult. Their breath became shallow and uneven, as if they had run very fast for very long. There were flutters of fear in their hearts. Their stomachs churned. In between all the noise, they could even hear their hearts pounding.

The authorities and the experts saw their 'anxiety', their 'panic' and the disabling 'phobia'. But they did not see the stark danger to their lives. If the vibrations were not there, if their huts were stable, who would panic? The community became extra-sensitive to risk and danger. They were ever ready to run. Some people unconsciously dealt with the stress by sleeping away from the settlement. The authorities brought in doctors and their pills, but they never addressed the conditions of their lives: Not only was this an assault of the senses, but it was a real threat to life.

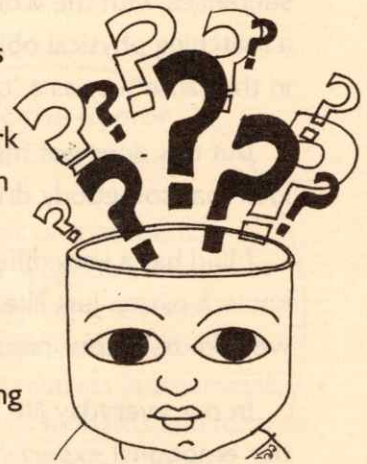
'Anxiety' is a condition causing constant but unrealistic worry about any aspect of daily life. It manifests as restlessness, sleep problems, increased heart-beat, upset stomach, tremors and muscular tensions.

'Panic' is a sudden, unexpected bout of intense terror. It manifests as shortness of breath, heart palpitations, chest pain, choking, trembling and feeling faint.

'Phobia' is an unreasonable fear of a particular object or a situation causing disruption of daily life.

Some aspects of the Mind

The 'mind', which is an object of study of psychology, is the basis for all our talk about mental health. The mind almost has a life of its own. What is the mind? Does it work in the same way as the body? Does it have parts? Can such parts be bought and sold, like kidneys? Like the body, are our emotions also socially controlled? Do planners make policies and plans to control our minds? Can the mind fall 'ill'? Can such a mind be 'treated' and 'cured'? Can we prevent the illness? We need to have a broad understanding about the mind, in states of health and ill health.



Mind has a special kind of reality

The body, like any other physical object, has form, colour, smell, texture, mass, weight, height and volume.

"Is the mind a physical object?"

"How many corners does your mind have?"

"Is your mind a 'he' or a 'she'?"

"What is the shape of your mind?"

"Can you see it in the mirror?"

Is Rama fooling us? Why is she asking us these absurd questions?

"The mind is like the physical body, yet it is different".

The body is tied to matter, space and time. Mind is beyond such limitations. It can skip and fly across geographical or other boundaries. On a usual day, it is full of energy, power, movement and will. As consciousness, it is free, joyful and creative. It can conceive of limitless possibilities in this world as well as in other worlds!

As children in school, we matched words with objects to learn about the world. In this way, we learnt about what we could see, feel, touch, hear or smell.



We know our world because we have the capacity to link our words and sentences with the world. But, even if we think very hard, we are unable to find a matching physical object for 'mind' or 'self'. The mind does not seem to exist in the same way as a 'table' or a 'chair'.

But this does not mean that the mind does not exist at all, or that it is only an idea that somebody dreamed up.

Mind has a very different kind of reality from a physical object. But we all know it exists. Just like the physical objects, or the body, it is also a part of what we take to be our natural world.

In our everyday life, we do talk and share experiences about our selves and our emotional experiences. We do have a shared language about the emotional self. We do talk about intimate thoughts, dreams, desires, feelings, behaviours. For example, we do make statements like the following: "Today, I am tense, stressed out, very off mood, feeling strange, nothing is going right...". Our emotional, psychological experiences are very much a part of our shared world of meanings, values and community. So even if we do not see our inner selves, it is very much a part of our shared world.

Mind is a process

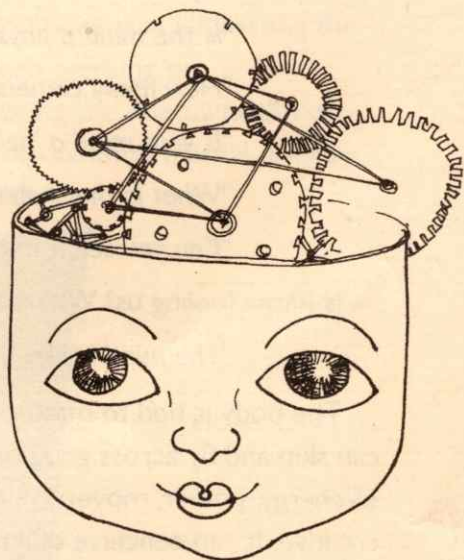
We do talk about things that we do not see or feel with our senses. We say they are 'abstract'.

We see the cassette, but can we see the song?

We see the watch, but can we see time?

We see the train, but can we see the journey?

Song, time and journey are abstract concepts. They help us to act upon and manage our world. The mind, too, is an abstract concept, a *kalpana*. The concept helps us to talk about and manage different personal, psychological dimensions to our individual and collective life. If there were no inner voices, we would never know that there are psychological



processes. We would never be able to take our selves seriously.

The mind is like the song, time and the journey. It is a process. It can be thought of as an endless, untiring activity. There is no human sphere of activity that does not involve the mind. The mind has the ability ...

"... to feel, to implement, to collect information, to endure, to love, to control, to care, to serve, to judge, to insult, to think, to go 'mad', to hurt, help, kill, lie and steal.."

Mind has the power to heal

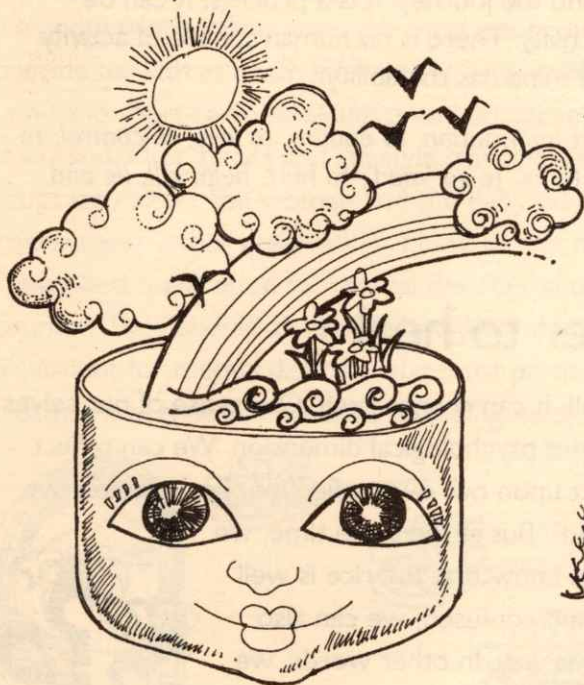
One's mind can reflect upon itself. It can change itself. Our sense of our selves - our 'self-identity' - is because of this psychological dimension. We can reflect upon the world. We can also reflect upon our own reflection. For example we can say that "This rice is well cooked". But at the same time, we can also ask ourselves, "How do we know that the rice is well cooked?" When we feel tired, sad and confused, we can also ask ourselves why we are feeling this way. In other words, we are *self-reflexive*.

Rama's inner voice shows her self-reflexivity. This is the ultimate form of creativity. We can question, create and recreate our worlds, both external and internal. There are of course limitations. But our strength is that we keep trying, due to the powers of our mind. The mind can create and change what it is. It is this capacity which helps us to overcome pain and emotional suffering. Mental health is about taking those necessary steps on the path to overcoming suffering and leading to personal healing.

Sometimes we may feel that it is better if we were not self-reflexive. It is better not to have to keep asking questions about ourselves. Why is our inner world so fluid? Why is it sometimes so *noisy* inside our heads? We do not seem to be able to pin it down at a point. It keeps us awake, restless, agitated. Sometimes, it becomes numb and goes to sleep when we don't want it to. Both our strength as well as our weakness are tied to the fluidity of the mind.



For Rama, the mind has a pleasant face to present to us and the world, as well as an unpleasant face.



The pleasant face of mind is like ...

"Waterfall, river, sun, mountain, home, flower, dream, petal, pond, candle, song, sea, sky, feelings, flight, light, heart..."

and the unpleasant face is like...

"Strong waves, stormy winds, fire, lightning, thunder storms, war, prison, earthquake, mechanical movement, loud noises, choking, beastly, explosive, bitter and like the lecherous gaze of a man."



Rama lived in the village and so fortunately nature touched her closely every day. She saw herself in nature and vice versa. She therefore used images of nature to express her thoughts. When she was tranquil and calm, the mind was represented by pleasant metaphors and a troubled mind conjured up unpleasant visions of entrapment, bondage and suffering. At the basis of mental health, are indeed the *diversity* of our psychological experiences.

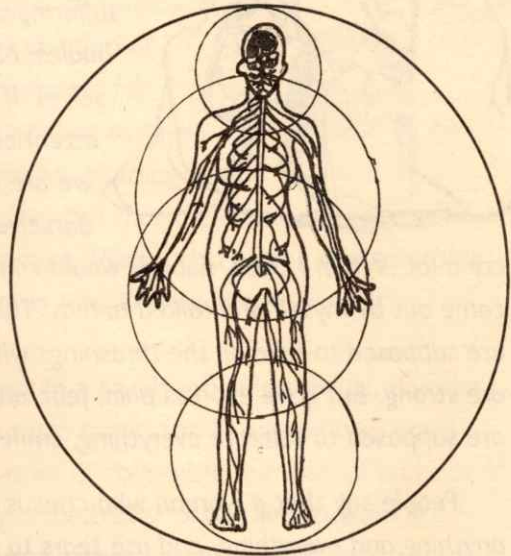
Nature around us is rich and varied. Human beings are no different and live as one with nature. Nature is in all of us, too, in all its aspects. We need to

accept all of it as our own - the light, the movement, the heat, the darkness, the inner diversity. This is Rama's philosophy. Emotional well being and personal growth are about accepting and being responsible for every nook and corner of ourselves.

Mental health professionals can find only one name for referring to our inner universe, whatever it may be. They call it the "mind". But Rama can think of so many words ...

"man, aatma, swayam, mein, dimaag, buddhi, brahmaan"

For the mental health professionals, the mind is sitting in the engine compartment of the body, that is, in the head. For them, the brain is as good as the mind and there is nothing more to mind than that. But for Rama, mind is everywhere. It is in the head, in the heart, in the fingers, in the stomach, in the breasts, in the navel, literally everywhere. It is not in the head compartment.



Creating support groups for mental health

People in various kinds of mental health difficulties, such as grief and trauma, do need help and support to heal themselves. The strategy of self help may be used for mental health. A support group would increase understanding and awareness about mental health through sharing of experiences and relevant literature. The group will help someone in finding solutions for their personal distress, coping methods, problem solving, etc. It would share awareness and assessments of available local resources and people in mental health. One of the important functions of such a support group is to create social spaces which are safe and empowering for people who are suffering from a mental health problem. It will offer friendships and community space making recovery possible.

Emotional health of women



"Our society does not understand the emotional suffering of women. Women do not talk about their bodies. Neither are we supposed to talk about our selves. If we do, society sees it as a way of seeking attention or trying to get something. People think we are unnecessarily talking too much about ourselves. They say that we are selfish. I used to cry a lot. When I cried, nobody would come near me. Rishi would ignore me till I came out by myself and talked to him. They say that women are naturally weak. We are supposed to take all the thrashings without a sound or protest. If we do that, we are strong. But if we express pain, fear, anger or other reactions, we are weak. We are supposed to tolerate everything, smile and be happy.

"People say that a woman who cries is being typical of her sex: She will cry for anything and everything, and use tears to get her way. Men cry only for valid reasons, they say: 'A man never cries. So if this man is crying, there must be a reason!' Why can't it be true for women also? We don't offer such sympathy or support to women who cry. We don't go back and discuss with her why she cried. We just wait for her to finish and to get on with her work."



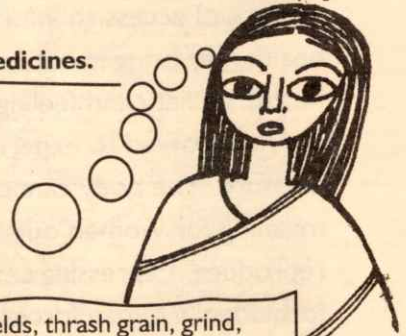
Crying is considered to be the natural fate of women. It keeps women in their place in a male dominated world. If a woman became angry every time instead of crying, imagine what chaos there would be. Crying is seen as the hallmark of femininity. Tears have been connected to objects of beauty, like jewels- gems or pearls! Women are expected to cry by those around them. If women are silent, they are labelled as heartless and even as infertile and masculine. Stories are told of sad women who died and later came back as a ghost to haunt their village.

Women's tears in real life are considered to be powerless and of no use.

Depression

Depression is a medical problem. Are you profoundly sad? Are you crying all the time? Do you experience sudden mood changes from happiness to sadness? Are you irritable and snappy, feeling hopeless, or feeling 'empty'? Have you suddenly lost interest in life, work, relationships and people? Do you experience physical signs of agitation or restlessness? For example, repetitive hand movements, pacing, wringing hands, pulling hair, changes in speech, explosive anger, retarded movements, etc.? Have you suddenly lost interest in your sexual life, health and safety? Are you feeling very tired and as if there is no energy for doing anything? Are your sleeping and eating habits normal? Are you losing a lot of weight suddenly, or putting on weight? Have you been feeling hopeless, that life is not worth living? Do you contemplate death very often? What about thought related problems? Do you experience nightmares, memory problems, concentration difficulties, inability to take decisions, etc.?

You are depressed. Here, take this, you need these medicines.



I draw water, cut wood, work in the fields, thrash grain, grind, pound and cook, wash, clean, bear children, rear them, feed everyone, and take care of old and ill people. I am overworked. I have no leisure time. My work is not valued. On the farm I do not get equal pay. The farm manager looks at me lecherously. Sometimes he touches me and pinches me badly. I eat last, or sometimes not at all. My body is used as an object for labour, sex and reproduction. I put up with beatings and insults. To survive, I give sex on demand. It is a chore, especially if my man is drunk, but I do it. I gave away my girl child to the Earth Goddess because my family did not want her. I have given them a son. I take care of everyone but no one even asks me about my well being.

I need a better life as well as good quality care.

Women have many responsibilities. But usually they do not have power in making decisions. They are seen to be of lesser intelligence and incompetent. Their identities are embedded in how well they perform as mothers, wives or daughters-in-law.

Women internalise this devaluation. They come to believe in their own worthlessness. They restrain the scope of their own activity and experiences. Instead of questioning societal values, they accept them as the only way to survive in the system. The threat of backlash and violence from others in the families keeps them from risking any change or protesting.

Lack of access to information, education and health may bring about further feelings of ill health, anxiety and feelings of inferiority. Women are not allowed to experience their bodies with pleasure. The body cannot have any positive meaning for women outside of the function to reproduce. Expressing sexual pain is also forbidden, if a man forces himself upon his wife.

Society forces women to accept their low position in life. This heightens their mental conflicts. The inner voices become stronger, there are more torturing questions. See what happened to poor and docile Rama, who did everything she was expected to do in the best way that she could. She was labelled 'pagli' and suffered even more.



Twice as many
women as men
suffer from
depression.

'Mania' is an experience of very 'high' mood, often alternating with profound sadness. It manifests as hyperactivity, easy distractions, nervousness, (not eating, not sleeping) recklessness, taking many risks, (spending money) trying to do too many things without completing anything, irritability (heightened religiosity, sexuality) and a loss of social inhibitions.

The reproductive and child bearing functions of women bring special mental health issues. Motherhood is more than a physical or emotional process for the woman. It is also the time when many cultural beliefs, rituals and values come into play. It is a time of great psychological transformation and change of status. However new mothers may have unhappy spells before or after childbirth, trying to cope with a number of internal and external changes and demands. Many factors contribute to a woman's emotional life at this time. Changes in daily routines and habits, fears about the health of child, sleeplessness, and physical changes following delivery are some stresses. Greater responsibilities in care of the baby, early motherhood, loss of mobility, lack of support in childcare and lack of co-operation from her spouse may also contribute to her sense of helplessness. Marital conflict, harassment because of bearing girl children or dowry, lack of emotional intimacy, domestic violence or other domestic problems may aggravate the situation. Gynecological complications, miscarriage, loss of child, or a very sick child, also create stress in a new mother.

Families must rejoice not only in the childbirth. They should also celebrate the mother's successful crossing of an important physiological threshold. It is the time when they must give the mother extra emotional support. A caring and conflict-free family can help a great deal in improving the mental health of new mothers and in removing her depression.



Adequate nutrition during pregnancy and good quality obstetric care will go a long way in preventing mental disabilities among children.

Medical perspective in mental health

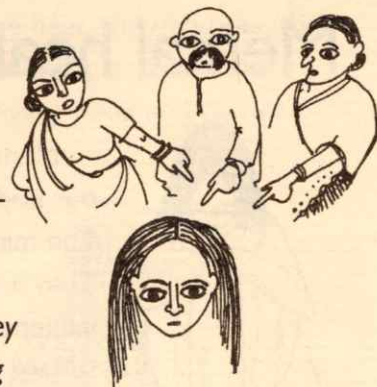
These days, we may be using words such as 'depression', 'schizophrenia', 'phobia' etc. casually in our community work. These are the special concepts of medical science. As in the area of physical disease, doctors have adopted some standards for estimating mental health and disorder. Doctors have used certain criteria in order to make a psychiatric diagnosis. Some criteria are- duration and severity. Duration refers to how long a person has suffered emotionally. Severity refers to how deep the suffering has been.

If you visit a psychiatrist, he would ask you about your feelings, thoughts, behaviours, relationships, how you function at home and work. Excessive fears or spiritual activity, withdrawing totally from the outside world, not eating at all, crying a lot, great anger, fear, terror, palpitations, irritability, moodiness, talking to people that no one can see, etc. are a few experiences that doctors may describe as 'symptoms' of ill health. If someone is highly confused, dull and lifeless, had many negative thoughts, spoke incoherently, panicked, did or said repetitive things, did not speak at all, had sleeping difficulties or lacked concentration, these may be listed as 'symptoms'. These symptoms would have lasted for a specific period of time. They would be severe enough to affect our social and working lives for days together. Symptoms may occur together. In physical health, for example, in 'diabetes', we would experience several things together: headaches, tiredness, thirst, weight problems, swollen feet, etc. Such 'symptoms', in the doctor's eyes, would fall together as a set, making it a treatable 'syndrome'. When our very lives seems to be taken over by our internal experiences, leaving us with no way of 'getting on in life', doctors may say that our mental health has been put to risk.



But as we saw above, in many ways, mind is not like the body. Mental disorder is not like a boil or a blister. It does not appear suddenly overnight in a person. Various complex social, biological and psychological factors contribute to a slow gathering of mental ill health. Unlike bodily disease, there are no blood tests, body samples or hormone assays to conclude mental disorder. The doctor goes by what a person and her family says about her 'abnormalities'. There are of course risks to this. Sometimes, the family may see 'abnormality' where none exists.

"Yes, the neighbours used to talk of a man who never "worked". He would just sit in the shade and gaze at the coconut trees all day long. Otherwise, he would do everything else by himself. But somehow he never wanted to go out to work. Yes, he did a lot of housework - he helped his mother a lot. He kept all the children in the village busy, too. They loved him. He never used to get angry at them. His parents were very unhappy as they depended on his income. They tried many tantriks. Nothing worked. Finally, they took him to a doctor. They felt that the doctor may treat whatever it is that is stopping him from working. Well, I don't think that anything was wrong with him. He was just a quiet man who did not like to 'work'!!"



We experience mental states of distress in a much more individual, diverse and creative way. A body with flu can express itself in only one or two ways- fever and shivering. A mind in distress has an uncountable number of ways of expressing it. We cope with, survive and get the better of our life situation in multiple ways. At a time of total psychological stress, our normal internal 'motors', which are used to certain routines, habits and ways of life, wear out. The 'emergency motor' starts functioning! Sometimes it may be difficult for people and even for us to understand this shift. In mental ill health we see an expression of mind's creativity and resourcefulness in coping with life events and internal conflicts. It is very important to understand and remember this when we see anyone who is mentally in distress. This is the time when they are powerless with respect to themselves and their life events. Their mind is working extra hard to overcome difficulties. In community work, and with the help of a friendly clinical psychologist and social worker, we could give the time, support each other, learn new skills and help our selves.



About 10 to 15% of all depressions are caused by general medical illness such as thyroid, cancer or neurological diseases. The doctor needs to rule out medical conditions before diagnosing mental disorder.

Mental health- a fine balance

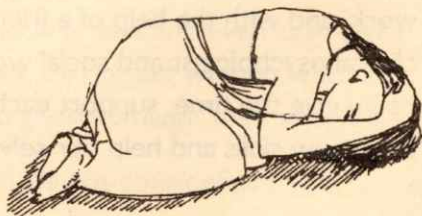


Mental health is a result of a fine balance between our body, brain, mind, and our social environment. The mind, body and our ecology are a continuum. They are one whole. They interact with and influence each other. Ill health or distress in one sphere may also reflect in the other sphere.

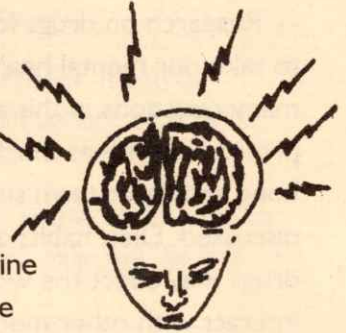
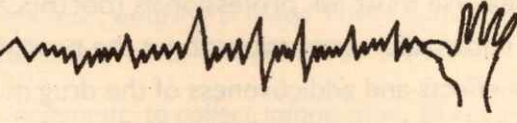
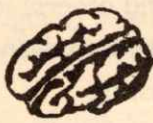
For example, if a woman is suffering from a chronic or severe physical disability she may experience a depression. She may not live life to the full and may have difficulty in taking care of her personal hygiene. She may need assistance in washing, bathing, eating, changing clothes, etc. She may experience shame and humiliation in being assisted, as she has always done these things on her own. Her self-esteem has depended on this capacity of taking care.

She may be in great pain or experience other physical discomforts. She may have special needs (e.g. a wheelchair) for moving around in the house. She may develop a dislike or hatred for her own body. Relatives may not always understand her suffering or her special needs. If she needs a special diet, the family may consider this an extra burden. She may not be able to attend functions or go out. Families may not visit or may ignore her. Her own family may not understand or support her, as she is not taking care of the house. She may become isolated and friendless. She may be so unhappy that she may not even feel like living.

'Self-esteem' is a concept psychologists use to describe the value a person attaches to herself or self worth. It includes opinions about oneself, one's talents and capabilities, one's successes, failures, sense of dignity for self, and image about the body.



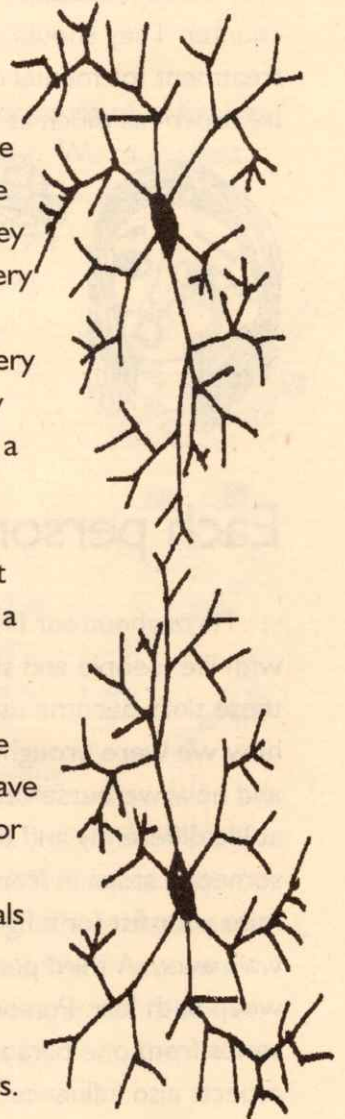
Inside the brain



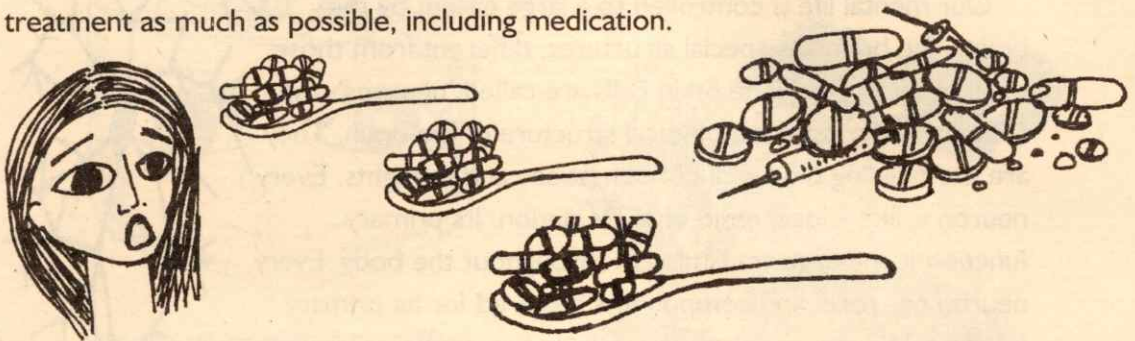
The brain, the central nervous system and the endocrine system are the biological basis for mental health. They are the physical basis of mental health. They are the organs that regulate our thoughts, feelings and behaviours.

Our mental life is controlled to a large extent by the brain. The brain has special structures, different from those of all other organs. The brain cells are called 'neurons', the smallest and most basic physical structure of the brain. They are the building blocks of our sensations and thoughts. Every neuron is like a local radio or a TV station. Its primary function is message transmission throughout the body. Every neuron has parts and components required for its primary function. We manage to successfully bat an eyelid or bend a finger because of these tiny neurons.

Messages are transmitted from one neuron to the next by very, very small electrical impulses. The transmission is a purely chemical process. The chemicals responsible for the process are called 'neuro-transmitters'. The neuro-transmitters jump from one neuron to the next across the 'synapse'. Synapse is where all the activity is and doctors have studied it a great deal. Doctors believe that an imbalance or an abnormality in the neurotransmitters leads to different shades and types of mental disorder. Various such chemicals have been studied, with varied results. Some well-known chemicals in mental health are Serotonin and Dopamine. Drug preparations for mental disorder are based on this theory about the brain, the synapse and neurotransmitters.

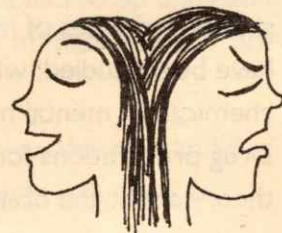


Research on drugs for mental disorder is not complete. It is important for us to take our mental health into our own hands as much as possible and raise many questions in this area. We must ask professionals (doctors and others) to provide us with as much information as possible about the prescribed medicine. Long and short-term side effects and addictiveness of the drug must be discussed. Diet, habits and life style must be discussed. Several mental health drugs may affect the woman and the baby during pregnancy. Drugs may also interact with other medication. These details must be discussed with the doctor. Prescribed medication for mental disorder should not be bought over the counter. They should always be bought under supervised care. If a relative is on treatment for mental disorder, she must participate in deciding her own treatment as much as possible, including medication.



Each person is different...

Throughout our life, we pick up a number of ways of looking at and dealing with life, people and situations. Whenever we have to respond to any event, these skills become useful. But these skills were developed by us, depending on how we were brought up, how we were taught, how our communities treat us, and how we ourselves are. Two human beings are not the same. They may look at life differently and deal with problems differently. For example, when someone stops in front of you and abuses you, you may raise your fist for a fight. Another person may turn and walk away. A third person may fall to the ground and weep with fear. Personality and responses to situations varies from one person to another. Such individual aspects also influence mental health.



**What the doctor
would want to know...**

history of medical or mental illness,
present medications,
use of alcohol or drugs,
allergies to foods or medicines,
illness in the family, both medical
and mental,
recent life situations,
areas of personal conflict.



**What the doctor
should tell you...**

total cost of treatment,
diagnosis and prognosis (course of
illness following treatment),
drug related information,
all possible alternatives in treatment,
referrals to psychologists and local
mental health support groups,
if any.



Social stresses

Rama says,

"In my village two or three years ago there was a severe drought. The crops of the rainy season all failed. My neighbour, Sathyamma, suffered a lot because of this. In their household, there was no food to eat. We all approached the government officials and they came to visit our area. Some families got 'compensation', but many did not.

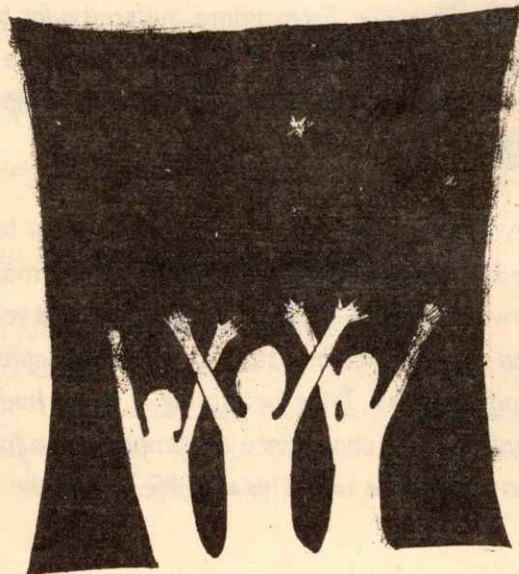
"Sathyamma's family was big. Her man was one among four brothers. Being the eldest, he shouldered a lot of responsibility. He had to borrow more and more money as time went on. Otherwise how would they eat? The heat was very bad. There was no sign of rain. The land was parched and starved, like the people. God, like the government officials, had no mercy. Talks for sharing of water had all failed. Some officials came occasionally to give condolence or compensation for a bereaved family. A son or brother would have taken his own life to end the misery.

"Sometimes they sent doctors to distribute medicines. Even a medicine company came into our village and caused quite a commotion. They said their new medicine would cure all our problems, but we must cooperate in their research study. We all said we only wanted water, not medicines. We chased them away. I was very much active in this. We did the right thing.



"But soon Sathyamma's man also committed suicide. Strangely, nobody understood why - they called him 'weak' and a 'coward'. After all, Laxmi's brother too has suffered but did he go and kill himself?"

The reasons for common psychological suffering among women and other vulnerable groups, such as the poor, are social, economic and political. Therefore the subject of mental health among women and other such marginalized groups is an issue about social sensitization and 'social treatment' also. Sharing of scientific knowledge and medical treatment is important, but it is not enough. Social empowerment is an essential component in addressing the mental health needs of women. Groups that have been working on empowerment issues have also been indirectly improving the mental health of the community that they serve. The best medicine for common mental disorder is called 'Social Equality'. Let nobody tell us otherwise!



Women's movement and mental health

All social movements are, in a way, mental health movements. The women's movement brought many psychological benefits to individual women. The women's movement everywhere has rejected labelling women's experiences as mental disorder. It has been able to give space for a diversity of women. Their 'abnormal' behaviour is being seen as an expression of their protest against patriarchy. In the movement, the women did not first have to prove their 'mental capacity' in order to participate. The women's movement is giving thousands of broken and wounded women the healing space required where they could be themselves, without being labelled, judged or evaluated. They would have the support of other women from whom they could learn about healing themselves. They could learn about survival, resilience and resistance. When families abandoned them for one reason or the other, the women's movement clears safe spaces for them. Activists gather their own resources and offer it for sharing - often enough in their own homes. Generations of activists have thus nurtured and cherished the culture of resistance in which younger women have been re-socialised and brought up. The women's movement teaches them about their bodies and their selves, and about dignity and self respect. Women learn how not to feel guilty all the time and how not to beat themselves emotionally. The movement taught them to find an external object for their troubled emotions - Patriarchy! It gives them nurturing friendships, otherwise rare in women's lives and a sense of community. It gives them a sense of equality. For many women, a feeling of self-worth came with being in the movement. They were able to ask questions. They were able to move forward.



Towards positive mental health

For women, one way to good mental health is to start questioning their own social roles and identities and to start defining it for themselves. NGOs working on empowerment issues can and do often help women to do just this. Women more involved with their own lives will make their own decisions. They will not be afraid of taking responsibility for those decisions. They will expand the sphere of their activity. They will experience their lives more fully. They will not be afraid to express their inner thoughts and emotions. They will want to explore their world on their own. Nobody needs to hold their hand. They will be more confident of themselves. Their lives will be more in their control. They will be able to establish boundaries in relationships. They will assert themselves against injustice done to them. They will be able to take necessary risks and manage those risks by themselves. They will be able to test out their own inner strengths and limitations. They will not be bothered if people call them 'selfish', 'disobedient' or 'stubborn'. They will be more inquisitive and engaged positively with their own selves and minds, using all its creativity. They will question themselves at every turn. They will listen to their inner voices, their intuitions. They will be more alive to mistakes, opening up their minds to new knowledge and experiences. When they face a problem again, they will have more strategies to solve them. They will overcome difficult circumstances because of this learning. They will be able to solve life problems more confidently.

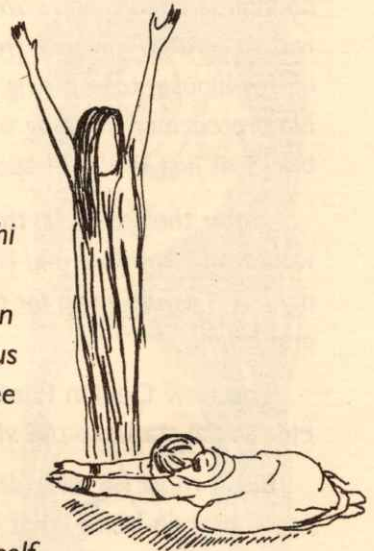


Rama continues...

In Rama's village, they called her 'pagli', caught her and tied her to the neem tree. Rishi tied her to the cart and took her away. What happened to Rama next? Where did Rishi take her? What did they do to her? Rama continues her story.

Religious Cures ...

"Rishi first took me to a local 'holy man'. The priest beat me with broomsticks and chappals to drive away the evil spirits. They gave me dirty things to drink and eat. Rishi left me there for a few days. Four months, actually. Many people like me were brought there. In the afternoons, when there was no puja, the temple people used to let some of us free to roam the streets. The 'hard cases' were tied to a tree and beaten with chains and sticks. There was no relief for them. I would wander in the village, begging for food. Sometimes the villagers gave me food to eat or a corner to sleep. They also gave me some pieces of cloth to cover myself.

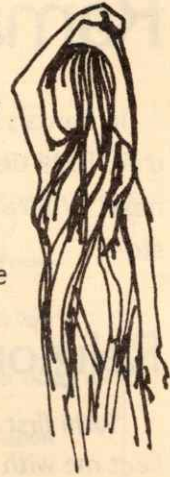


"Soon the Devi started visiting me.

"I wandered back home, with Devi's help. Everyone in my village thought that the Devi lived in me. I now had new hidden powers. I could make predictions about the future. I could recognise signs and omens. I would always tell people what their fate had in store for them. Even Rishi and his new wife would bow down in respect in front of me and the Devi would curse them. How that Hema Malini begged and grovelled! I used to laugh inside. The Devi would forgive Hema Malini, but with anger and contempt, not even giving her a single glance. Rishi fearfully repented before the Devi! He never beat me again. Hema Malini treated me with respect and awe. They all were forced to respect the Devi. Even 80-year old Periamma, bossing over everyone in the village, fell at Her feet.

"I used to dance and sing when the Devi was in me. I could then talk Amma's pure language. She gave me that power. People were in awe of me. They would stand in a circle and watch and pray. The entire community was there. The women quickly changed into their temple sarees and wore flowers. They brought flowers for me also.

My own saree would fly in all directions. How could the Devi be bound by a saree? The women would respectfully give it back to me after the Devi left. When the Devi was residing in me, I had incredible powers. I could climb poles and trees. I could do somersaults. Even though I was not an athlete, I could run, climb, bend, turn, kick, fall, catch and shout. I could act as if I was in the Olympics. The Devi was full of boundless energy. She gave all Her powers to me. The greatest pleasure was to scratch my back freely. Devi would allow this also. I could take off my blouse, take a twig and give my back a good methodical scratch. No pretence of standing with my back to the wall to get the corner bricks at just the right spot...



"After the Devi left, the women would collect around me. They would wipe my face and body. They would give me nimbu sherbet. I would go back to my hut. I would sleep for ten hours at a stretch. I would wake up completely fresh and bright."

The new Devi in Rama's life gave her powers of another imaginary world. Her social status in the village increased. The beatings stopped.

But it must be difficult living half your life as a goddess, and another half as a mere human being, that too, a woman. Was Rama able to speak about the injustice done to her? Did she escape the bondage of power of the real world? People who gave her respect, did they now stop calling her barren? Did they stop calling her 'pagli'.

Rama wanted to have the normal trials and tribulations like other women who collected at the village tap each day. She did not enjoy the special status. She wanted a usual, happy, carefree life. She wanted Rishi to be with her, talk to her, care for her and show her affection. He ignored her completely, though the beatings stopped. But she was not unhappy. She stopped crying. The dancing made her hungry. She ate and ate...



'Possession' is not a mental disorder

There are many ways in which we escape daily stressful situations. For the men, there are many such escape routes. They go to the cinema, chat with their buddies... If not anything else, they light a beedi, tie up their dhoti and walk away into the farm or the forest. For women, such options to escape the situation are not easily available. So they find an escape route within their own bodies and minds. Possession by the Devi is such an escape route. It is not a mental disorder.

When a woman is possessed, her mind expands. It thinks new thoughts and experiences new feelings. The mind becomes like a two storey building- Except that there is no door between the ground floor and the first floor. Regular activities happen on the ground floor, such as domestic chores, children, daily work, the insults and the beatings. On the first floor, special activities relating to the possession happen.

When the stress of daily life becomes too great, the woman escapes from the ground floor of her mind to the first floor. The first floor is where she is safe from the stresses. It is like a safety valve for her. When the pressure of life becomes too great, it is a place to let off steam. Possession happens in an alternate stream of consciousness. Some psychologists call it an 'unconscious' happening.

From the cultural point of view, women who are possessed get many benefits, as Rama herself told us - attention, respect, status, flowers, nimbu sherbet...! No stigma is attached to possession. Biologically also, possession has some beneficial effects. It is like doing exercises, running, dancing, cycling very fast or swimming. It brings about desirable physiological changes and a feeling of being refreshed and bright.

Possession is a self-help strategy that women adopt, to stop themselves from 'going mad'. It is like keeping a journal for one's own self. It is a type of self expression. It does not harm anybody. It does not need to be 'treated'.

"Dissociation" is a psychological state where consciousness becomes divided into two parallel streams of thoughts, behaviours and activities. Usually, this is a harmless defence mechanism to escape stresses. Sometimes, for example in the case of childhood trauma, it may lead to severe dysfunction or disability.

Mental asylums

"The doctors came and said that Devi 'possession' was a kind of superstition. They educated the village and held many programs. They said everyone should be logical and rational. We should use our analytical ability. They said I suffered from a mental illness. Everybody thought I was fooling the village. Rishi was not bothered one way or the other.

"My brother, Venu, took me to the city mental hospital and left me there. I was crowded with two other women, cheek by jowl, on one mattress in the female ward. The bathrooms had no doors, no water in the taps, no mugs or buckets. Nobody would use them. The whole ward reeked of urine and excreta. The lice and the bed bugs were unbearable. They would give me a bath once a week. All the women would be pushed together into the bathing area. Water would be poured on us. They did not have soap, towels or clean clothes. The staff was stealing away our supplies.

"In the morning, we would all go from the ward to the hall. There we sat till the evening. In the evening, we would all walk in a line back to the ward. Stout nurses would come into the ward and shout short commands at us. Sometimes I understood them and sometimes I did not. Soon it stopped to matter.

"Everybody was like me over there. We did not do anything most of the time. There was nothing to talk about. No reason for plaiting the hair. Krishna ayah sometimes talked to me with paan in her mouth and combed my hair. My medicines made me dull. I slept for very long hours. The rest of the time I would be thinking of things I could not remember later on.



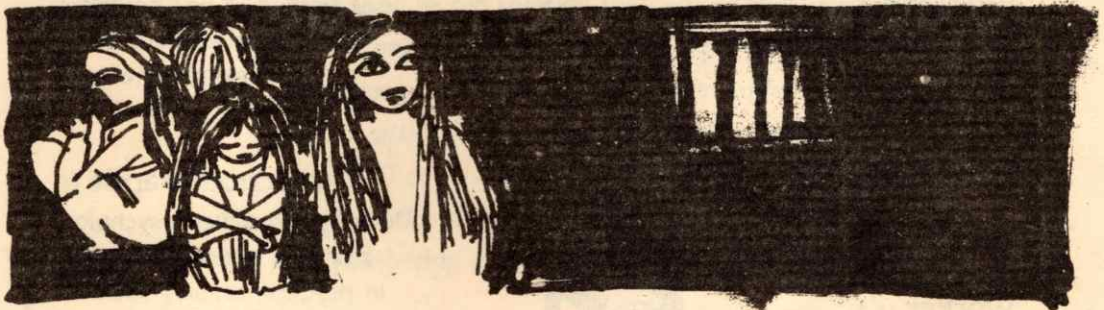
"Sometimes I was taken into the special ward with the green curtains. Here, they gave me an injection. Then I lost my consciousness. As the ceiling fell on me and took me into the darkness, I knew I would wake up with a splitting headache. Everything would be dull and lifeless for days after that. Only the green curtain and the ceiling would keep coming back. It would come reeling and crashing on my head. For many days I would remember nothing but the marks left by the injection

needle on my elbow. I did not know what they did to me. They did not tell me even if I asked. Others said I was given 'shock'. The doctors were called 'Shock Doctors'.

"Sometimes the boy who brought tea in the evenings would stroke my knee. When I looked up, his eyes would shift. The fingers on my knee would tighten into a painful pinch.

"Then I used to ask myself- will I spend my entire life labelled as 'mad' inside the hospital? I was washing the dishes, cutting the vegetables, cleaning the wards and tending to the garden. The hospital did not pay me anything for all my work. They told me that this hard labour will 'cure' me of my madness.

"How? I am not supposed to know all that. I am not a doctor, am I?"



Law and mental disorder

Our laws relating to mental disorder are very poor. Under these laws, a diagnosis of mental disorder robs the citizens of their civil status altogether. Women are especially victims of this type of exclusion. Angry women, women who deviate from social norms, and barren women are often rejected by families and communities and put into mental institutions by using the law and by labelling them as mentally ill. A certificate of mental disorder is often exploited by relatives for robbing a woman of her property or for divorcing her. The law also does not provide any protection for the right to good quality care in mental health. There have been several Supreme Court as well as High Court Judgements regarding improving the condition of mental hospitals. These judgements have addressed some physical parameters of treatment and care, but not the issue of rehabilitation and reintegration of mental hospital residents back into the society.

Mental health service system



A psychiatrist

is a medical doctor, with psychiatry as a speciality. He can diagnose mental illness, prescribe medication or other medical treatments.

A psychoanalyst is trained in a special therapy technique called psychoanalysis.



A clinical psychologist

is a post graduate in clinical psychology, is trained in psychological testing, and sometimes in psychotherapy.



A social worker is a person with a degree in social work, sometimes with a specialisation in psychiatric social work. They offer supportive counselling.

A psychotherapist is usually a qualified psychologist with intensive training in psychotherapies such as behavioural, cognitive or psychodynamic therapies.



Counsellors may be social workers or lay counsellors with training, who can offer emotional first aid.



A psychiatric nurse

has a qualification in psychiatric nursing.

Acknowledgements:

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2. To the peer reviewers – N B Sarojini (Sama), P R Bhat (IIT Mumbai), and the Tathapi and Bapu teams.
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We appreciate very much the time each one spent, the comments and the encouragement. We thank you all.

The ethnographical materials presented in this booklet are fictionalised and bear only a metaphorical relation to actual events. We have drawn from several archival sources - the narrative on private hospitals is based on custodial shelters in Tamil Nadu (Bapu files); that of the mental hospitals on a mental hospital in Maharashtra (Bapu files); other ethnographic materials have been drawn from the Maharashtra WAH workshop.

About Tathapi

Tathapi was started in September 1999, while the team was serving as the Documentation Unit of the Maharashtra WAH! (Women and Health) Programme, 1998-2000. Based in Pune, the Trust is dedicated to resource development in the broad area of 'Women and Health', including access to information and the building of skills at grassroots level, particularly throughout the Maharashtra region. A core area of Tathapi's work is 'Body Literacy'. For copies of this Booklet as well as offers for translation of this booklet in to your local language, please contact Tathapi office.

About CAMH

The Center for Advocacy in Mental Health, started on 1st August 2000, is a research and documentation center in mental health. The Center is devoted to providing support to various community organisations on mental health. The Center offers library and documentation services. The Center is working on bringing out various publications as well as training programs to increase the awareness and skills of organizations in mental health. At the core of the Center's work, is mental health activism and struggling for human rights within the mental health service system.

How to use this booklet -

This booklet has been produced in order to increase the potential of organisations in the mental health area. The booklet can be used for mental health orientation with groups in ongoing training programs. By building group exercises around the themes of the text, you may go beyond this text and explore for yourself new ideas and issues, relevant to your organisation's work.

One kind of exercise would be story telling, used as a strategy in the text itself. You may use the booklet for exploring the local understanding of mental health, what are the shared experiences, local knowledge and practices. The booklet may also lead to affirmative action, if you stimulate discussion around mental health services, what is available, who are the professionals and what is the quality of the service. You may study the local mental health institutions and traditional practices, for both what they offer as well as their problems. You may also study the area of developing sensitivities within the organization and in the community on mental health, and how to give care and support for those in emotional difficulties.

These activities may lead to a further thirst for knowledge in the area of mental health. Self learning may lead to gathering more ideas and information on various aspects, including community mental health, law and human rights.

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