

Putting Women First: Women and Health in a Rural Community

Rani Bang, with Sunanda Khogade and Rupa Chinai Foreword by **Rahul Goswami**

Foreword by Rahul Goswami, pp vii

This book successfully plays many roles. It is a commentary on the chronic myopia of policy-makers who all too often fail to see the state of many millions of Indians and the ways in which it could be improved. It is an essay on contemporary sociology, concerning a tribal society that is being buffeted by modernity and whose traditional kinship and ecological systems are being sorely stressed. It is a logbook of case medicine, for Rani-tai has skillfully woven into her book the major ailments and complaints in evidence among the people of rural India, and the minutely-recorded data on every case registered at her clinic, explaining the malady and its cure in a manner that always educates and never overwhelms.

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Rani-tai has scathingly and also with an annoyed bafflement, exposed these contradictions on gender roles. In a male-dominated society where men are largely unaware of these matters, expecting women to be knowledgeable is entirely misplaced; in situations where men do know about these matters (and women can surely learn if not kept ignorant), their responsibility to educate their women is all too often abandoned. It is rarely mentioned. Where women are aware of these matters, expecting them to initiate dialogue or negotiate with their men is unrealistic, given their subordination.

Putting Women First speaks sagely of the manifold aspects of the care our population needs: of regional disparities and critical gaps in the health care delivery system, of infant mortality, obstetric care, maternal and child health, of *dais* (traditional birth attendants) and *anganwadis* (crèches), medical termination of pregnancy, and the desperate need for better-staffed primary health centres. 'Meeting health needs of women through a system that is sensitive to their differential access to health care also needs to be taken into account,' recommended the National Commission on Population (2003). Bang-bai's clinic practises that sensitivity, day in and day out.

Introduction by Rupa Chinai

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These young men and women approach Bang-bai for a variety of reasons: for treatment of malaria, infertility, medical termination of pregnancy, antenatal check-up, depression, sexual and gynecological problems, amongst others. Their medical needs are swiftly and accurately diagnosed, and low-cost drugs are prescribed.

However, this is not solely about administering medicine. When she is listening to a patient, Rani Bang uses a sixth sense that hears an unspoken need. That is when she shuts the door for the sake of privacy and simply says, 'Tell me, I am here to help you.' When this happens, stories of rural Indian live pour forth, from women and men in search of comfort and understanding, desperate for information and guidance.

As the winds of globalization and liberalization swirl across the Indian subcontinent, rural families are sucked into its vortex, unprepared for the rapid changes wrought in their economic, social and personal lives. The most profound impacts are being felt in the spheres of education, information, material enhancement and change in lifestyle through food habits, dress sense, appearance and behaviour. All of this has an impact on human relationships, lives and health.

Extract

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Addressing reproductive health issues would mean those that affect both women and men. It would require good services for prevention and treatment of STD and other infections. We need to offer safe abortion, family planning, contraception, maternal and child health services, as also access to clean water. Besides, we need to address issues of health education by making people aware of sanitation and hygiene (simple things like how to bath and dry oneself, the importance of washing hands before eating and after going to the toilet). Equally important is the role of exercise; knowledge of good nutrition- and how to cook while retaining the nutritive value of food- in order to maintain healthy immune status. So much money is spent on talking about AIDS and little else. Adolescents, the age group ten to nineteen years, comprising 23 percent of India's population, which is around 230 million, need to talk about that and many other things as well. Our national programmes for them are failing because of the single disease- oriented approach. Young people need to know about a spectrum of issues affecting man-woman relations. It is important to talk humanely to them, take a personal interest in their needs and help them find solutions to their problems.

Often young people do not have anyone they can turn to for counsel. They are ignorant about the sexual act and feel shy to find out about the difference between normal and abnormal, and that includes even those who are highly educated. Once a young doctor came to me and said she was still a virgin because her husband did not know how to perform the sexual act. Her worry was: 'If I tell him, he will think I have a lot of experience.' That's why it is necessary to create awareness amongst the adolescent age group, to start talking to them about man-woman relationships and issues such as sexuality, how to cope with stress, the cause of marital disharmony and responsible sexual behaviour. They also need to know that a good relationship is

built through respect for one's partner and friendship between them. It is about knowing each others' strengths, likes and dislikes. It is about believing that good relationships are built through communication and trust, and learning that sex is not the only way of expressing love.

Men often miss out on spending time with their children. They need to know that simple acts like eating together, communication, help to create and strengthen family bonds. Many couples do not talk to each other at all, and soon get tired of their partners. Marriage, however is about working out compromises. Both partners should know that when there are undue expectations, disappointment inevitably follows. Trust, honesty and similar moral values keep a marriage alive. One may have huge differences with one's spouse, but there must be complete confidence and trust in each other when it comes to physical and emotional love.

Women often tend to make too many sacrifices when they are young and start grumbling about lost opportunities in their middle age. An over-protective husband, on the other hand, can make the wife dependant, following which he might resent her for doing nothing. It is therefore important that couples give each other space. Often after the birth of the first child a husband feels threatened by the lack of attention from his wife, who is absorbed with her new role as a mother. The man needs to understand that the feeling is natural and pay attention to the mother's needs. He needs to understand that the woman's psychology is that of nurturing, a quality which extends to the kitchen, garden, family and social relationships. There is a need for trust that replaces insecurity. Similarly, the menopausal phase often brings loneliness in women.