

An interaction with Durgamma

Cheppudama? (Meaning “Shall we tell?”). This was the apprehension expressed by Durgamma and her husband when told that her life of recovery was going to be written down to be shared with others in similar situations. An expression of fear of stigma, rejection and exclusion, not so much for her but for her two daughters, who in the future need to be married. She said that people certainly do not come forward to marry a person having a person with mental illness in the family. The fear of the progeny getting the illness being the main reason. Her husband said, *“People do not know that it is treatable and they think such people are violent and dangerous to others. My wife, as a tailor, was earning around Rs.50 a day. When she got this illness people stopped coming to her.”*

He continued, *“She was talking to her self, walking through the streets in the night. People saw a different Durgamma and said she has gone mad. I was hurt and stopped working to look after her. My father-in-law was of great help in taking care of my wife and my two daughters”*

Durgamma shared about the actual on-set of the illness, *“I was always anxious. During the initial stages of our marriage I was nervous when I met my in-laws; I wanted to be the best to them in all possible ways. I wanted them to have a good relationship with me. Thus, when the second child died after birth some 15 years ago, I fell sick. At that time itself the doctor told me that it was not physical illness and to consult a mental doctor. He gave some medicine. I recovered but did not consult the mental doctor.”* Her husband has been regretting to this day for not listening to the doctor’s advice

Husband spoke about how he took care of his ill wife, *“As a daily wage painter I leave early in the morning to the city, yet caring for her was not that big a problem. I attended to the needs of children as well hers. I was more worried about her fights with neighbors. I suffered embarrassment and was not able to concentrate on work. I took her to the hospital. She was given shock treatment (ECT) and advised medication. I spent more than Rs.10,000.”*

Here Durgamma intervened and said, *“After shock treatment, I lost my memory for almost 10 days. Taking those tablets was making me drowsy and I was unhappy that I was not myself.”* Husband continued, *“I was taking her to temples as people said she was possessed by a spirit or goddess. Literally I was going crazy; thoughts of future used to worry me.”*

Later, Durgamma’s father talked about her illness to an NGO Community Mental Health Worker. Durgamma said, *“My illness is in my past now. We are thankful to Meenakshi (field worker) who took real interest in us and has been helping us in getting the treatment and improve our financial situation. Now I feel a lot better.”*

When asked to tell about their current state of affairs and future plans. Durgamma said, *“I am feeling near normal. I do all the jobs such as cooking, washing, housekeeping, tailoring etc., as in the past. I continue to meet the doctor once a month and take medicine regularly. Of course now it is reduced dosage now. I have joined a self help group. It consists of 14 people. One of the activities is saving and availing loans. Now there are more tailors in this area and I stitch three blouses a day that fetches Rs.30. I have taken a loan of Rs.3000 from the self help group and started a small shop that deals with local requirements. More than earning money I always like to interact with people.”*

Husband said, *“I earn almost Rs.500 a week and I give that money to her. Her earnings are about Rs.600 a month. She pays back Rs.350 every month to the group. That leaves Rs.250. Therefore, our total monthly income is between 2000 & 2250 a month. Our health & education of our children is our first priority. We have been managing our lives. My wife wants to buy cloth and make garments and sell. I am not all that comfortable with her shopping – independently going to town buying things etc.”*

When looked at Durgamma, she understood my unasked question and said, *“I feel confident to go on my own and to carry out shopping and other business. How long should I be protected like this?”* I agreed with her.

She offered to make some coffee for us. We accepted her offer. At the end they showed us their little shop. We took leave off them after thanking them profusely for their time and sharing their lives with us.

(Source : BNI archives, further edited)