

Agnes, a Bombay advocate and activist, noted predictable prejudices on the part of male judges. Too often, when the girl's age was difficult to establish—it could be 13, 14, 15, or 16—they quibbled over “age of consent”; if the offender was a “youth” of 18 or 20, they reduced the sentence because it was “not in the interest of justice to enhance the sentence of five years” for raping a seven years old; if the medical examination revealed no external injuries, it was often assumed that the child had “consented”; if the defence counsel could persuade the learned judges that “enmity” between the families was the reason for the charge, they could reasonably acquit the accused for want of “conclusive” evidence. In one case from Orissa in 1985, a 16 year old rapist of an 11 year old girl was convicted of “kidnapping, abducting and rape”; the sentence: a fine of Rs.5,000 and “imprisonment till the rising of the court.”<sup>3</sup>

The legal domain is only the most obvious domain in which change and redressal are imperative. Of equal—indeed, greater—importance is a close and careful examination of the sociology and pathology of such violence; of our criminal and judicial procedures when dealing with juvenile offenders, and subsequently their rehabilitation; and of the intersection of patriarchy with the increasingly violent ambience of our inner cities from where most—although by no means all—such cases are reported. Unless we unravel these strands and question the impact of such violence on children, we will be unable to unmask the seemingly random and violent conjunction of lives that the rape of minors represents.

*Ritu Menon is the publisher for Kali for Women in New Delhi and she is active in other women's organizations.*

<sup>1</sup> All figures are taken from data compiled by the Crime Records Office and the Crimes Research Bureau Police Headquarters, Delhi.

<sup>2</sup> As stated in personal interviews with Meena Menon, Bombay; Amitam Arehta, Ahmedabad; and from police records in Patna.

<sup>3</sup> Flavia Agnes, unpublished manuscript.

## JAYA MEHTA

### The Museum

Step gently. Within me there is a museum.  
Stand silently. So silently that you can  
hear your own breath.

This is a museum. In it is the note  
frozen in the throat of the koyal  
stuffed with sawdust and the colourful  
fluttering of the pallid wings of the  
butterfly lying curled on its side.

Stand silently:

If you watch you will see the pigeon's  
neck puffed up with its cooing and  
the tremor in the red eyes of the  
timid rabbit when it hears the lion's  
roar. No, no, no, don't keep looking at it.  
It may again palpitate with fear.

Look at that deer...it seems to be  
springing—leaping—running, doesn't it?  
But no, look properly, its fleeting hooves  
are firmly buried in the ground.

And on this side...do you recognize  
this face? Do the lips seem to be  
quivering? No, no, don't touch it.

Have you forgotten? This is a museum.

*Jaya Mehta was born in 1932 in a village in Saurashtra. Until her retirement in 1992, she taught in the Gujarati Department of SNDT Women's University.*

*This poem was translated into English by Dr. Shirin Kudchedkar.*