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Journey of a lifetime

CHATLINE Feminist, writer and activist Vasanth Kannabiran shares stories of her marriage with K.G. Kannabiran, her organisation Asmita and her passion for writing. **SOHINI CHAKRAVORTY** listens in

Tucked away in a lane in East Marredpally, the house that has witnessed many political movements and decision-making now stands sedate and peaceful under the mild October sun. A small gate leads to the main entrance, a door that remains open for all, at all times of the day. Feminist, writer and activist Vasanth Kannabiran's house is not unknown.

Vasanth, who has worked extensively on gender and developmental issues, was among the 1000 women to be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005. She recently launched her book *A Grief to Bury: Memories of Love, Work and Loss*. "I have seen many housewives harassed and never having the time to think about themselves," says Vasanth, explaining the premise of her book. "They remain devoted to their husbands and family with very little time for themselves. Even though widowhood is terrible, they appear relaxed and suddenly find the voice to speak up."

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...Journey of a lifetime

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The book is based on a series of interviews with 12 prominent women talking about their work, marriage and widowhood. "These are 12 remarkable women and my friends. They have trusted me with their stories of compromises and sacrifices and life after widowhood. They have relived that period," she says.

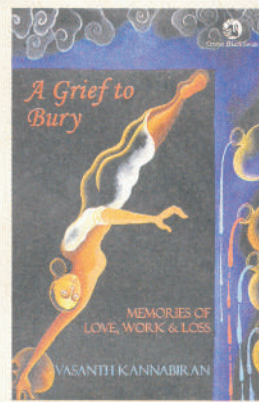
Even though the manuscript was finalised before she lost her husband, eminent civil rights activist K.G. Kannabiran, the sense of loss remains. "I was always haunted by the fear of loss. There was a constant threat to his life. In the 70s a lot of our friends got killed and I have lived with that fear and taught my children to live that," she recalls.

In December 2010, K.G. Kannabiran passed away after a prolonged illness. It was a national loss. "If Kannabiran cannot live in the hearts of people, are tributes and memorials going to bring him to life? To be loud in praise is easy. It dies out in a moment," read Vasanth's anguished appeal in a piece she wrote immediately after his death, *The Dead Need No Rectification*. "When he was alive, we had discussed how the funeral will be conducted. My husband was a simple, austere man and but his funeral became such an occasion with people from the media wanting to view the body. I understand that he was a public figure and his death left a vacuum in the hearts of many. But I felt that the family had a right to be left alone," says Vasanth.

A post-graduate in English Literature, Vasanth became a feminist and human rights activist when her husband started taking political cases in 1969. "My political consciousness was definitely influenced by my husband," she says. She remembers the times during the Emergency when her husband fought cases for the political activists. Her house was often visited by the witnesses and the victims. "That

On the book

A *Grief to Bury - Memories of Love, Work and Loss* is a series of conversations with women about marriage and widowhood. The author Vasanth Kannabiran has interviewed 12 eminent personalities including Neera Desai, Meenakshi Mukherjee, Ela Bhatt, K. Saradmoni and Shanta Rameshwar Rao. Talking about the inspiration behind the book, the writer says, "I was talking to my friend Kathy Sreedhar (who is also featured in the book) and she said that even though family and friends mourns with you but people go back to their lives and it is the wife who is left with all the memories." It took her six years to finalise the manuscript after



conducting the interviews who are mostly her friends. "It was Ela Bhatt who told me that we keep postponing things but there is no later in life and that was engraved in me," says the writer.

was life; however, I took care of the children." She took the children to occasional circuses or films, sometimes with her husband and sometimes without him.

Despite having had a happy marriage, she felt her feminist ideals contradicted the institution of marriage. She believes that marriage warps and constricts the intellectual activities of the female partner. She recalls instances when she was invited to engagements along with her husband where the wives were expected to bond with each other. "After one such instance, I told my husband that I will carry a book with me and read there. He stopped asking me after that," she laughs. Despite political tussles because of her feminist beliefs, she feels mutual respect and acceptance made their marriage work. "It is never about who will cook the rice, making love and holidays. Even polarisation between work and pleasure will not work un-

less you become a total vegetable. Mutual understanding of each other is important," she explains. Earlier generations of women had to make a distinct choice between marriage and career; things have not changed much, even though there is an increase in the number of working women. She says, "The pressure is still there where despite having a career a woman's life is considered complete only when she is married."

A writer and poet herself, she says, "Writing is a subversive activity and you have to believe in what you write. It is not the speeches but the writing that stays. It will result in perpetuation of ideas," she says. She has worked extensively on censorship of women's writing. "The common perception is that women's writing is largely autobiographical. Volga's first novel *Sveccha*, which talks about a woman walking out of a marriage, was subjected to a lot of criticism. Sometimes writers



THE WAY WE WERE Vasanth Kannabiran shares stories of her life with human rights activist K.G. Kannabiran PHOTO: NAGARA GOPAL

are forced to give in to public demands," she says.

When she is not writing, she is busy working at Asmita, a resource centre for women. The

organisation offers counselling to women subjected to violence and abuse, empowers women, creates awareness about gender equality, and educates them

about the existing laws. "The idea is to create a non-judgemental space where women can come forward and share their problems. We conduct training

programmes, show short films which can be instrumental in starting a debate," she explains. Though they have been able to mobilise a good response on

gender rights in the rural areas, numbers are yet to pick up in urban areas because of information overload.

No topic is out of bounds with

Vasanth Kannabiran. Her easy charm, frank opinion and unaffected manner can convert anyone to a good listener. A photograph of her with K.G. Kanna-

biran, against a long, muddy road stretching into the backdrop, is set on a table in her living room. "The photograph is symbolic of the life that we've shared," reflects Vasanth.