

MADHU KISHWAR



**Indumati speaking at international women's day meeting in Pune, 8 March, 1978**

## A Life Given To A Cause

### Interview With Indumati Patankar

*These are excerpts from a taperecorded interview in Hindi with Indumati Patankar, a freedom fighter from Maharashtra. She lives in Kasegaon, and is one of the few women who continue to be politically active even at this age.*

*Indumati's early life was integrally intertwined with the freedom struggle as it filtered down to the villages of western Maharashtra. Here she tells the story of how she got involved in the movement and how her own life as a woman changed radically as a result of that involvement. She comes from the maratha community which is the dominant peasant community of Maharashtra. The maratha peasantry have been among the chief beneficiaries of the prosperity that has come to this region of Maharashtra as a result of what is commonly referred to as the 'green revolution.' Yet this community is one of the major citadels of social conservatism, especially as regards women's*

*situation and their role in family and society. Coming from such a background, Indumati stands as a challenge to that whole culture of women's oppression and confinement. In this interview, she tells the story of her own life through the years of the freedom movement and after. It is also an account of what the movement looked like when viewed from below—from the village level upwards. In translating her account, I have tried to stay as close as possible to her words and the spirit behind them.*

*I would like to emphasise that this account should not be read as a comprehensive account of the national movement in this area. Such an account would require a much larger effort and interviews with many many more people. This is Indumati's version of events as she perceived and analysed them.*

*It is significant that even a woman like Indumati who left her home to work for years as a full time activist seems to have played no more than a supportive and auxiliary role in the movement—assisting in propaganda work, passing on messages and literature, participating in demonstrations. The fact that this is the role women by and large played is borne out by several other accounts of women's participation in the national movement. Despite active participation, only an insignificant number of women came to have some access to decision making power structures within the movement.*

*Another thing that struck me while listening to Indumati's account was the crucial role that marriage and children seem to play in determining and limiting a woman's life. Even for a woman as courageous and determined as Indumati, getting married and having and rearing a child, came to mean an end to her active involvement in social and political affairs. This despite a self chosen and very happy marriage. Her coming back into politics seems more like a chance happening, following her son's getting involved in politics. Since this too has been the common experience of women within many radical movements, it is important for radical movements to address themselves to this question as a priority issue. Unless this happens, women are not likely to be able to participate creatively or to affect the course of movements by participating in sufficiently large numbers. At best, they will join such movements as stray individuals like Indumati or as daughters, wives or mothers of male activists, and will remain peripheral to the decision making processes in the movement.*

*Indutai, I would like to start with your telling me something about your early life and your family.*

Indoli is a small village in Karad taluk, Satara district of Maharashtra. I was born on September 15, 1925, in this

village. It was a population of about 25,000. My father was the only son of one Nathaji Patil, a big maratha land owner.

My father lost his mother when he was very small, so he was brought up

by his Kaki, his paternal uncle's wife, and was much pampered by her. As a result of so much pampering, his upbringing and his *sanskars* came to be such that he did not study much. He used to, do *pahalwani* (wrestling)

in the village. He also began to drink a lot. He was married at the age of 18.

*Could you describe the atmosphere in your home ?*

When I was a child, my father was very well known as a big landowner. It used to be said “Nathaji is a big *sahukar*.” Ours was a large joint family—my father, grand father, his four brothers and their sons, and lots of labourers and servants who worked in the fields—about 100 people in all. All the servants lived and ate in the house. There were so many people that it was hard to make out who was one of the household and who an outsider. There used to be a long line at mealtimes. Many of the women of the house did not even know who the men of their family were. For example, one year after her marriage, my aunt one day asked her sister-in-law: “Which of these men is my husband ?” She had been married at the age of 12; which was considered a late marriage in those days. She had been veiled on the wedding day, and had not seen her husband. After that, she had got no opportunity to have a look at him or to get to know him.

*Didn't husband and wife ever meet?*

No, never. After the women had finished cooking and the men came in to eat, the young wives were not allowed to go in the presence of the men or to serve the food. This was the tradition in families such as ours. The young women would all sit and eat in a separate room. When a girl started menstruating, her mother-in-law would not allow her to meet her husband for a year. After that, the mother-in-law would decide when the girl was old enough to meet her husband. Even then, husband and wife did not sleep together in a separate room. All the women would sleep in one room and the husband would go in, groping for his wife.

He would carry a matchstick so that he could make sure he was laying hold of his wife and not his brother's wife. He would wake her up and take her out. They would stay together a short while, maybe an hour, and then separate. They

would be in constant fear lest someone see them together. Such was the practice in our community. This is still the situation in some areas.

Of course, this was only amongst the households which considered themselves upper class. It was thought that coming together a few times was necessary to produce a son. Normally, when the man came in, his mother would sit and talk to him. The wife would prepare the food and then



**Indumati in early 1940s**

say to her mother-in-law : “The food is ready.” Then the mother would serve food to her son and talk to him while the wife sat in another room. This is how my sister, who is four years younger than I am, lives even today.

*Did women of the Maratha community go out to work in the fields ?*

Not in families like ours which were wealthy and considered *khandani*. Women of ordinary families did work in the fields. Women in our family did the work at home which was also a heavy burden. There was so much work that a woman would keep working till midnight. She had to cook, then scrub and wash all the utensils, then press

her mother-in-law's feet, and so on, before she got to sleep around midnight.

*How many brothers and sisters were you ?*

I have one brother and four sisters. We were five sisters but one sister died some years ago. I am the oldest child. Girls are usually not welcomed in maratha families. It is thought that a girl does not carry forward the family lineage, so there is a great desire for sons. When I was born, my paternal uncle and aunt said: “Oh, it's a girl. It should have been a boy”, but my maternal grandmother who was staying with us said: “So what if it's a girl ? I wanted a girl. Girls are good.” My uncle did not like this.

*How is it that your grandmother was staying with her daughter? Is that common ?*

No, it is not. People thought it a bad thing for her to stay in the house of her son-in-law. But my grandmother said : “Let people say what they like. I will stay with my daughter.”

My grandmother had led an unusual life. When she was 17 years old, her husband died. At that time, she was expecting my mother. When she was widowed, my grandmother went to her parental home. It was thought that a widow should have no desires, should not eat well, should not dress well. Her mother put many restrictions on her, and treated her as if her life was over. My grandmother, who was only 17, felt very unhappy. She thought: “What kind of life is this ?”

In Pandharpur district of Maharashtra, there is the cult of a god called Vitthal. Every year a big festival is held in that area. My grandmother thought: “In any case, I am not allowed to eat eggs or meat, so why should I not become a follower of the nonviolent faith of Vitthal?” So she became a devotee. Quietly, she asked an old woman who lived in the neighbourhood to take her along when she went to Pandharpur. She asked this neighbour, because she knew her own

family would not allow her to go if she asked them. So she went on foot from Karad to Pandharpur.

From then on, she made it a way of life to walk on foot from one shrine to another. As a widow, her movements were supposed to be severely restricted, but in the name of the god she could move about freely with respect.

I think this moving around and seeing different people, different ways of life, hearing different ideas, broadened her outlook. She educated her daughter, my mother, upto class four. Since my mother was her only child, she also stayed with her later in life, and her presence in our house was a very positive influence on my mother. Because of her, my mother too did not discriminate between boys and girls. All of us sisters were educated. I studied upto class seven. My father, even after he became active in the movement, was more influenced by his conservative upbringing, and used to say: "What is the use of educating girls?" But my mother would say: "Let them study." My grandmother laid great emphasis on education. It was my mother and grandmother who saw to it that we studied.

My father's sister was married into a family where *parda* was practised. She used to visit her parental home about once in three years. This occasional visit was the only time she ever stepped out of her in-laws' house. She never set foot out of their courtyard in the intervals between these visits, nor was she ever allowed to go to any other places besides her parental home once in three years. When her brothers went to visit her house, she was not even allowed to meet them. They would be entertained in the men's section of the house, and as they were leaving, they would stand outside the women's section and say: "I am going." They could not see each other face to face. She could not see even her younger brothers, let alone other adult men. This aunt of mine wanted me to marry

her only son, but my grandmother refused. She said: "Nothing doing. I won't send my granddaughter to such a family. I don't want her to be closed up in such a house." I still remember my grandmother and her way of thinking.

*Were you too kept in parda ?*

No, my father was active in the movement, so I was not kept in *parda*. Nor was my education interrupted at this stage. The neighbours and relatives would repeatedly say: "Why do you want to educate her ? Does she have to take up a job ?" My mother did not like to hear such comments. She would answer: "I see no difference between a son and a daughter." My father too, despite his political involvement, would say: "Why educate her so much ?" But my mother would insist on letting me study.

Our house was very much like a commune, even though we did not know of this term at that time. Raghuanna Limaye and his wife Dr Satyawati Limaye, who were both activists and had in fact met each other while working in the movement, worked with my father and spent a lot of time in our house. Apart from them, at least 10 or 15 movement people were always staying at our house. Meetings of the Shetkari Parishad and the Sewa Dal were held in our house. I was greatly influenced by the life and work of Raghuanna Limaye, even more than by my father. When a new phase of the freedom movement started in 1930, Raghuanna Limaye who was a student in Pune, left his studies and immersed himself in the movement. He came back to his village because he felt that the freedom movement should not be confined to the cities. It should spread to every corner and every village of India. Only by reaching the masses of India could this movement lead to freedom.

My father's mentality remained that of a landowner, and he was not prepared to leave everything for the sake of the movement. Of course, he

did go to jail but on the whole, he engaged in only as much political activity as was possible while living at home. But Raghuanna had left everything and worked as a full time activist. I think it was due to his influence that my life developed as it did, and I am active even today.

*Could you tell me more about the movement activity in your area ? Which classes of people were most active ?*

The movement had been going on since 1930 in our area, but had fallen into a lull. By 1942, people were very conscious and there was a big upheaval, but the preparations for this uprising had been under way since 1930. Like thousands of other young people throughout the country, Raghuanna had been devotedly working in his area. There were several other young men like him such as Sitaram Garud who had tried to involve and organise peasants, labourers and other sections of the masses. People wondered how the spinning of Gandhi Charkha could make the Britishers leave India. So these activists would move from house to house spreading the much needed message of freedom. School teachers and artisan groups (known as *balutas*) such as blacksmiths, tanners, potters, were more active. Big landlords did not give up their life to the movement even though they supported it, but artisans, small peasants and school teachers, who were poor but articulate, left everything and moved from place to place, went to jail, and so on. Baburao Gokhale has written a book called *Jagruk Satara*. This book describes the people who took part in the movement.

In 1930, there had been a forest *satyagraha* in Birasi village. Laws had been passed forbidding people to collect forest produce. The villagers decided to defy the law en masse. About 250 people collectively went into the forest and cut wood. The police tried to stop them. Many women

took part in this action. They were poor, forest dwelling women.

When the salt *satyagraha* was launched, people from this area also went to join the Dandi march. I do not remember the names of all the active women. There was one Parvati Katkar who went to jail and gave birth to her child there. Sulochana Joshi from Birasi went to jail in 1930 and died in jail.

At that time, Gandhiji was continually preparing the people, and every decade or so, he would intensify the struggle. It is true that freedom did not come merely by spinning, but with the *charkha* Gandhi's ideas reached people's homes. In our area, both men and women participated in *charkha* spinning, boycotting foreign cloth, making one's own clothes and the spreading of nationalist sentiment through such symbolic actions.

*Tell me more about the individual Satyagraha.*

Upto 1941, there had been several movements, yet people generally feared the police and feared to go to jail. Gandhi wanted to see whether or not people were individually prepared for the final battle for independence, whether or not people could overcome their fear of the police and of the jail, whether or not they were prepared to go to jail. That is why a call was given to all those who believed in freedom, asking them deliberately to break the laws as individuals, and voluntarily to go to jail. For example, curbs had been laid upon the freedom of speech. In 1941, to test the preparedness of people, Gandhi asked them to defy the ban on public assemblies. According to this ban, five or more people were not permitted to meet in a public place. So if, on a particular day, some people in a village wanted to offer individual *satyagraha*, they would go to the police station and declare that they were going to break the law against freedom of expression and against public meetings. They would invite the police to come and arrest them. The

police would come. Five people would get together, shout slogans, and speak against the British government, asking the British to quit India. Thus, they would break the law and the police would take them away. Meetings would be held in villages to honour such people. They used to go to the village border to express their protest.

About 150 such people courted arrest in our village. Even though in size ours was then a small village, it was big from the point of view of the movement. No woman courted arrest in our village. My father and

me. I had the feeling that I too should be active. When my father went to prison in 1941, I was about 16 and was studying in class seven. I had to discontinue my studies, and the burden of some of his political work fell upon me.

When all the leaders of the movement from our area had gone to prison, one Achyutrao Patwardhan began to lead the movement. He said: We will answer nonviolence with nonviolence and violence with violence. Weapons must be met with weapons." He, Aruna Asaf Ali and



**Indumati (seated extreme left) with other performers in a play staged at the teachers' training college where she studied, 1959.**

Raghuanna Limaye were among those who went to jail as *satyagrahis*. After 1941, they were released as were all the others. When Raghuanna and his wife went to jail, they decided to leave their one year old daughter in our house, not with their relatives. Raghuanna said that as an activist, he had a closer relationship with another activist like my father than with any of his relatives.

After one year of the individual *satyagraha*, the 1942 movement was launched. On August 8, 1942, Gandhiji, at a public meeting at Goalia tank, Bombay declared that the British

should quit India. When people in our area got this message the following day, they began to snap telegraph wires and burn government rest houses and bungalows, with the intention of paralysing the administration. After Gandhi was arrested, people said: "Who is there now to give us direction? We are our own leaders." This is what happened in Satara district.

*How did you get actively involved in the movement ?*

I had grown up in this atmosphere, with all these examples of action before

other socialists who were operating underground, set up a parallel government or *pratisarkar* in the area.

All the village women whose menfolk were in prison used to come to me, and I used to write letters on their behalf. I had to use a code of sorts so that the letters would not be censored. So if an activist called Nana Patil had come to our house, I would write "Nanibai came over." In prison, my father met a communist called Chitre. The communist party, because it followed the Soviet line, was opposed to the Quit India movement launched by Gandhiji in 1942. Chitre disagreed with this party line so he was expelled from the party, and he plunged into the movement. My father, through discussion with him, became a communist. When Chitre saw the kind of code I used in my letters, he thought I was an intelligent girl and should get more actively involved in politics. He wrote to some friends of his who sent me some books to read. These books were about communism, about Russia. I remember two of the books. One was Maxim Gorky's *Mother* and the other was *From Volga To Ganga*.

*What other work did you do besides writing these letters ?*

I used to help in activities such as distribution of bulletins to the underground activists who were hiding in the forests, and carrying, weapons, revolvers and other equipment to them. These things would be delivered to our house and I would pass them on.

When my father was released from prison, he appreciated my work, but wanted it to be confined within certain limits. He was not agreeable to my working beyond those limits. At this time, I decided that I would work for the revolution, both till the achievement of national independence, and after that as well. I had a girlfriend called Tambwe. She too used to work in the Charkha Sangh. With my father's permission, I

accompanied her on a visit to her village. But I did not come back. I went to Walwa taluk, to do underground work, which my father did not want me to do.

*How did you manage to take and execute such a decision ?*

My father said : "You must stay at home and work as I do. You must think of the family honour." There was conflict at home. Restrictions were placed on me : "Don't do this, don't do that." My desire could not be



stilled, so I left home and went away. My father had some friends of his own age, who had a more liberal approach to women's participation in the movement. These people recognised my desire. One of them was Pandu Master, a primary school teacher in our village, who had left his job and joined the movement. He and his wife helped me a lot at this time.

I moved around in Walwa taluk and enrolled 4,000 people as Congress members. I did this by moving from village to village, house to house. In 1943, when the movement was in full swing, the Sewa Dal planned to hold a camp. This camp was for activists of the underground movement. Whoever wanted to get actively involved had to go through the Sewa Dal. The Dal did the job of preparing freedom fighters, and of teaching them the use of guns and other weapons. Within the Sewa Dal *shivir*, Pandu's wife Geeta Patil and I organised a women's *shivir* attended by 150 women. The men's and the women's sessions proceeded side by side for three weeks. Some of the women were widows, some were young school girls. The funds for this camp were raised by Sewa Dal activists. At the camp, we began the day by cleaning the village. Then we had a bath, did exercises, performed manual labour, studied, learnt from political activists, then again did some exercises in the evening.

*Did you also discuss the question of women's freedom ?*

Not separately. We believed that women should be part of the struggle for freedom, Gandhiji's constructive programme emphasised struggle against *parda*, superstitions, violence and animal sacrifice for the appeasement of gods and goddesses. He insisted that people should not practise untouchability, and that people of different castes should eat together. We took up all these issues.

We also talked about the need to avoid extravagance and unnecessary rituals at weddings. At that time, there used to be what were known as *Gandhi lagan* or *tali lagan*. The bride and groom would garland each other, and everyone would clap hands. That solemnised the wedding. Many such weddings took place in our area. Sometimes on one day, 15 or more such weddings would take place, one after

another. All this was discussed in our study circles and camps.

*Could you tell me about the parallel government ?*

Yes. At this time the Sewa Dal in our area was operating under ground. The activists lived in the villages, and the police were after them. Sometimes, a few would get arrested, but usually they would be well hidden. It was decided that the administration of village affairs would be conducted within each village. Disputes too would be settled within the village. Parallel courts or *nyayadan mandate* were set up at village level. This was how the parallel government worked.

In village Birasi, 125 Patils resigned their government posts. They declared that a parallel government had been formed, and that it had no connection with the British government. This happened in every village in Satara and Sangli districts. The underground activists were in control of the parallel government. People stopped paying taxes to the British government. In those days there was a popular Marathi saying to the effect that they would not let the sun of the British empire rise in their area. The British rule was over in our area. It was our own rule there.

The parallel government setup libraries in every village. These libraries had nationalist books, socialist and communist literature. Each village had a branch of the Sewa Dal. The parallel government made a rule prohibiting extravagant weddings in our villages. The activists would try to stop such weddings. Freedom fighters would go to every wedding in the village and tell the family that no extravagance would be allowed.

*Were women active in the parallel government ?*

Yes, a few were. Not many. Besides me, there was a young woman called Rajumati Patil. She was active in setting up the parallel government, and even took up arms during this phase. She

faced dacoits and ruffians, a gun in her hand. She was even more active than I was. No other woman took up arms as she did. Then there was Muktabai Sathe of matang community which had been declared a "criminal tribe" by the British. This tribe had shown great courage during the time of Shivaji. Muktabai had been active in the movement since she was 10 years old. There were also Sulochana Joshi, Sonubai Deshpande and a few others.

inspired by a certain aim, left his home and his family, and refused to be tempted into returning even when his father and his wife called him, so I too will not return." This is what I used to tell all those who tried to persuade me into going back. Of course, Buddha's cause was very different from mine, but I thought I must be ready as he was to sacrifice everything for my cause. (She uses the word *dhyeya*).

*Even today, most political activists seem to think that it is difficult for a*



**Indumati (center) in her student days, dressed for a college play**

*In which activities did women participate the most ?*

They took part in demonstrations, in forest *satyagraha*, in spinning, and in the work of the Sewa Dal, such as distributing bulletins and passing on weapons.

*Did you not go back home during this period?*

No, I stayed active in the field. The movement had a great impact on society. People used to welcome us into their homes, and arrange for our board and lodging. The activists used also to collect funds from big landlords and traders, to meet the expenses of the movement.

*What was the attitude of your family ? Did they try to call you back?*

When I first left home, my parents felt very hurt. At that time, they made many attempts to call me home. My father sent his friends to tell me to come home and do my work in the village. He could not see why I should stay out. But I knew that if I went back to the village, there would be many restrictions placed on me. The influence of neighbours, relatives and of my father's conservative thinking would make it difficult for me to work in that environment. So I said : "No. I have chosen this as my life work, and I am not coming back." My father felt very upset by this.

At that time, I had not studied or read much, but I had read the life of Buddha. I thought: "Just as Buddha,

woman to work actively, especially in rural areas, unless she marries a likeminded activist. What was your experience ?

On the contrary, at that time, I used to advise even other young men who worked with me not to get married. I used to say : “Once you get married you will become entangled in your family and will not be able to work. So you should not get married.” That was my idea at that time.

I had formed this idea from my experience, from observing those around me. I had seen that many people, like my father, did not give up everything, leave everything for the movement. They stayed at home, and did only as much work as could be done, along with the family responsibilities. At this time, I did not think of the possibility of intercaste marriage. I knew that once one married in the maratha community, one could not work effectively.

*How is it that you got married if you were so opposed to the idea ? Were you pressurised by people in the movement ?*

Yes, I did get married. But before marriage, I had tried to persuade even Babuji (her husband) never to get married. I used to say that all those who want to fight for the country’s freedom would not be able to do much once they got married.

Of course, there was constant pressure from my family and from my father’s friends. Sane Guruji was also sent to persuade me to go back and settle down. Then there was another activist by the name of Ramanand Bharati who was a sadhu. He tried to persuade me, and so did many other friends of my father, but I did not let any of them influence my decision.

When the police repression increased, we went underground. Occasionally, the police would conduct a raid and some of our workers would get arrested. Neither I nor Patankar ever got arrested. To be able to evade

arrest was considered a sign of courage. Whenever the police got suspicious, they would come in large numbers to look for revolutionaries. Sometimes, they would act on a false tipoff, and would go back unsuccessful. Occasionally, people were arrested. Some people would choose to get arrested in order to escape the police repression outside. But those who wanted to stay out and work would try to evade arrest.

When the police began to pressurise us too much, we moved to Bombay. *Gimi* workers gave us a place to stay. That is where I met Babuji Patankar. Babuji and I used to go together to study circles and to Hindi classes. Working together in this way, we grew close as friends and later this took the form of marriage.

When we decided to get married, my father was dead opposed to the idea. He thought himself a *khandani* maratha. Patankar’s family came from a village near Panhala in Kolhapur district. They had migrated from there to Kasegaon because the *sahukar* in their village had taken away their land. So they came as landless labourers here to Kasegaon. His mother and maternal grandmother used to work as agricultural labourers. That is why my father’s friends also opposed the marriage. But I said : “This marriage will certainly take place.”

*How did you come to say yes to this proposal of marriage ?*

I took a long time to say yes. Babuji persuaded me into it. He said: “Marriage is a must. How can you go on living like this ?” He assured me that both of us would work together after marriage. That is how I slowly came to change my mind.

*But how come you were persuaded by Babuji when you had not been persuaded by all the others who had tried to persuade you ?*

(She laughs). That is because when one is in love, it all happens. Before we got married...(she hesitates and says

“What is the point of talking about all this now ?” but I encourage her to go on). I was the kind who was determined to stay unmarried. I used to say : “We should live together like friends and remain *brahmacharis* (celibates) even after marriage.” Babuji said : “Then what is the use of getting married ?” We had long discussions about living as *brahmacharis*. I used to feel that as soon as we had children, I would get entangled in family life. Since marriage would inevitably mean such entanglement, I was against it. Babuji said : “All this is by mutual desire. You should not see it as your duty alone. If we have a child, I will share in the responsibility of bringing it up. We will continue our political work together.”

There was another consideration too. After the country became independent, people started saying : “Now everyone will go back home. Where will you go?” That was when I decided to get married to Babuji. Some of these friends were opposed to our marriage. They said : “Go back to your father. Where else will you stay ?” I said : “I’m going to stay here and continue to work here.”

At that time, Wardha was a famous study centre for political activists because Gandhi, the leader of India, lived there. I wanted to go and study at Wardha, but I had no money to support myself. When I expressed this desire to other activists, they kept postponing it, saying : “What is the hurry ? We’ll see.” When I spoke to Pandu Master with whom I was staying, about my decision, he opposed it and there was a conflict.

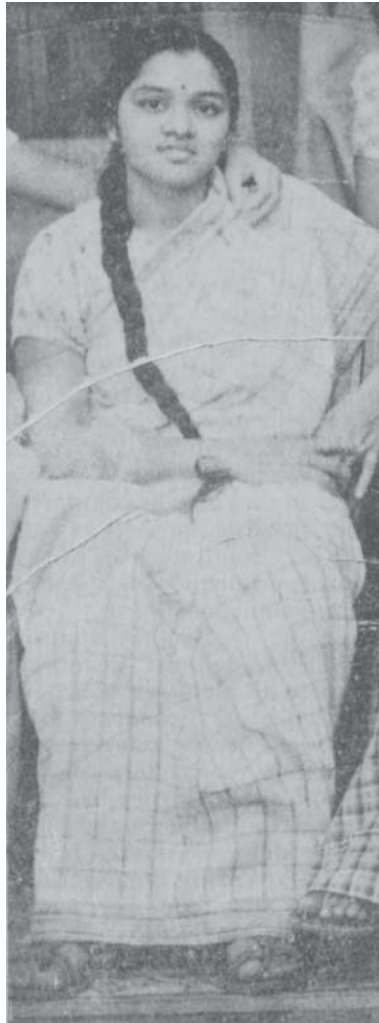
In the meantime, he got suspicious about my love for Patankar and began to oppose that as well. He tried to force me to go back to my father’s house. I also began to realise that some activists do not have a very healthy attitude towards women. I began to feel that he had bad intentions towards me, though I treated him like a father.

Moreover, he wanted me to obey

him in everything. I plainly told him that I had left home to work for freedom, and I would follow his advice only if it seemed right to me, not otherwise. I had not obeyed even my father in that blind way. His wife and other activists never dared speak in opposition to him so he got upset by my plainspeaking. There was unpleasantness, and he insisted that I should go back to my father's house. Soon after that, he and the others set off for Satara, leaving me alone in the room in Bombay. What was I to do? I had only Rs 20 with me. I wondered how to put together the money to go to Wardha. I remembered that I had once stayed at the Saswad Ashram in Pune district. The woman in charge there, Premabai Kankar, had very affectionately told me that the doors of the Ashram were always open to me, and that I should return there. Even though I felt that the Ashram was not a suitable place for me to train as an activist, I thought I could go there for a while, and then work out my plans to go to Wardha. Having reached this decision, I felt calm and fell asleep.

After a while, I heard a knock on the door and asked: "Who is there?" I told myself: "Why should I be afraid? After all, I left home on my own strength, and I have to live by that strength." It was Babuji, who had come thinking that I would be afraid, and would need support. So he stayed with me. The next day, he suggested that I should not rush off to Saswad because he and other activists would collect the money for me to go to Wardha. So Patankar, another activist called Pandurang Borade and I began to stay together. We used to go to study circles together and work together. They advised me: "Why do you want to go to Wardha? There are only Gandhians there. We want to work for socialism. To that end, it is better that you stay here, study with us and work with us in the movement. This way, you can both study and work at the same time." I thought it over and decided to stay on.

I was the only woman there at that time. In fact, maybe I was the only woman in the local movement who had become active by leaving her home and family. All the other women, especially those from *khandani* families, worked with the consent of



**Indutai**

their families.

*When you lived alone with two men, did you not worry about what people would think of you?*

I knew they would think all kinds of things, but I had the examples of Buddha and Ramchandra before me. Both of them refused to be pressurised into giving up their

chosen mission. So I said that I too would not give up my way of life, no matter what people said. Very soon after that, however, Babuji and I fell in love and got married.

One other experience too may have influenced my decision. Seeing Raghuanna's relationship with his wife gave me the feeling that a freedom fighter can be a good husband. Raghuanna believed that a wife was a comrade and had equal rights. In 1941, when his wife, Satyawati, who was an ayurvedic doctor, went to prison, she came in contact with a communist woman named Meenakshi Karadkar. Through her influence, Satyawati too became a communist. When she was released from jail, she began to work with communists. Raghuanna was a Gandhian socialist. They had two little girls. Satyawati did not want any more children but Raghuanna wanted a son. She said: "If you want a son, you can divorce me and marry again. I do not want physical relations with you. If you have relations with me against my will, I will consider it a rape."

Raghuanna did not want a divorce. But I think her communist friends began to incite her against him. Raghuanna told her: "Look, if you want to work with communists, go ahead and work with them. I will continue working for the cause I believe in." Yet she continued constantly to fight with him. She would not look after the children or do the cooking. She would tell him that he should do everything. I don't think a woman having equal rights should mean that her husband should become her slave. Ultimately, she asked for a divorce. He agreed, saying: "I have tried my best in every way. If it still does not work, let it end." She did not want to keep the children. He kept the children but told her that she was free to see them whenever she liked. Later, when she was in financial difficulties, he wrote to her, offering her money, and also sent her two saris as a present.



Satyawati got divorced not because she wanted to marry again but because she wanted to be free of family responsibilities. From this experience, I felt that sometimes a husband can be like Raghanna, and I too felt the need to get married. Moreover, I also liked Patankar's views and attitudes. In those days, we did not use the term "women's liberation" but I felt I would be treated as an equal. He had studied only upto class seven, but his views were those of an educated, enlightened man.

*When did you get married ?*

We registered our marriage in 1948. In 1947, we had got married in Bombay by *Gandhi padati*, that is, by exchange of garlands.

*Why did you have to go through the second ceremony ?*

When we were married by *Gandhi padati*, only a couple of friends of Patankar were present. We had to register our marriage so that people could get to know of it.

*Why did you choose registration rather than any other ceremony ?*

We preferred it. Many of his friends were either communists or socialists, and they were in favour of a registered marriage. After the registration, some other friends of his said: "Registration is fine, but the marriage should actually be performed with Vedic rites." So we went to a hostel, performed a *havan* and went through a third ceremony.

*How come you agreed to three different ceremonies ?*

I had to do it because people said it should be done. They said they did not recognise a registered marriage. When friends said that, Patankar said: "No harm in another ceremony."

*What was your view ?*

I had no view. I said: "You want to do it—fine."

*Were other women activists pressurised within the movement to get married ?*

Yes. For example, Rajumati Patil had a bad experience. Male activists used

to put pressure on her. Each of them wanted her to live with him. She escaped by getting married in the conventional way and after that, she left her political work and lived as an ordinary housewife. At that time, I did not get to know of this because I was not in close contact with her. We worked in different areas. Recently, I went to meet her and she told me that this was how she felt compelled to get married.

To come back to my own story, after we decided to get married, I stayed for a while in Pune instead of coming straight to this village, because the atmosphere here was very conservative. In those days, I used to stay by rotation in the homes of different socialist leaders who took the responsibility of my upkeep. That is when I became very close to Sindhu Deshpande who was a remarkable worker and gave me a lot of support. Anutai Limaye was the leader of the Maharashtra unit of the Sewa Dal. I also came in contact with Vimal Garud, Indu Bhatt, S.N. Joshi, and Gore. Indu Bhatt later married Kelkar, a political activist. She is still actively working within the Lohiaite socialist group. Although Kelkar was an asthma patient she decided to marry him because of their commitment to a common cause. They both decided that they would not have children. This was so that they could give their all to the movement. I worked with some of these people in rural areas. Here too, we organised women's camps, some of them lasting three weeks.

*Did your family ever get reconciled to you after your marriage ?*

No, not really. Before marriage, I used sometimes to visit my parents but after marriage, I did not go home for 30 years. When my father was seriously ill in 1951, I wanted to go and see him but was afraid that he might get annoyed if I went. Babuji said: "At such a time you must go." So I went

upto Karad where I met Raghanna who advised me not to meet my father, because since he was a heart patient, if anything were to happen to him, I would be blamed for causing, it by my presence. I came back without meeting my father, and he died shortly afterwards.

Some years ago, when my brother had marital problems, he remembered his sister. His wife had a very rough time at the hands of my mother so she left her husband and went home to her parents. My brother was in bad shape and wrote to me. I asked my brother to come over and discuss things with me. He told me he had no quarrel with his wife but she could not get along with our mother. I tried to unite my brother and sister-in-law, was unsuccessful. My sister-in-law said very emphatically: "I will go back to that house only after your mother's death." So that marriage had to end.

Then I arranged his second marriage with the niece of an activist I knew. I promised the uncle that if anything went wrong, I would take full responsibility for this woman. After the marriage, she too suffered at the hands of her in-laws, so I kept her and her two children with me for ten years. My mother did not change her ways. Finally, I told my brother not to neglect his wife because of his mother. I advised him to take the whole business in his hands, so he took his wife home. There was conflict, but they are managing. When the family was in financial difficulties, I helped them. I did all this while living here but did not once go there.

*How did your political work continue after marriage ?*

After independence, our socialist wing of the Congress became converted into the left socialist party. The people were still inclined towards the parallel government. The socialists, following the leadership of such people as Jayaprakash Narayan and Aruna Asaf Ali, worked on many issues. Large

demonstrations were staged against price rise, and against the levy on farmers. The parallel government set up courts and fought against the local ruffians who used to terrorise the poor and extract money from them. Such movements were in progress at many places. The influence of the socialist wing began to grow.

*How did you start teaching ?*

A year after my marriage, Bharat was born. While he was small, I had to be at home. The financial condition at home was not good. I thought that if I took up a job, it would be a financial help, and also all my energy would not be expended on housework. Moreover, I felt I could combine this job with party work. Babuji did not like the idea. He said : “Why don’t you do social work, or study ? I want you to study and become a lawyer or something like that. But I don’t want you to do this job, If you get transferred out of the village, you will have to leave the job, Besides, people do not have a good opinion of women teachers. So it is better that you do not become a teacher.”

I did not agree because I felt I needed a job. We discussed it, and he said : “Well, do as you like.” In 1951, I became a primary school teacher. At that time, my salary was Rs 70 a month.

My parents-in-law were poor, but very loving. They were not educated yet they were enlightened. My mother-in-law used to encourage me to read while she did the housework. Babuji and I lived together only four years as husband and wife, but there was so much love and affection that it seems as if we were together for a much longer time.

*What work did Babuji do after marriage ?*

At that time his mother did agricultural work. They also had a small *kirana* shop in the village. He continued working for the socialist wing as a full time activist. During the first assembly elections, he was put

up as a candidate by the left socialists. The Congress was much stronger in that area as compared to the left socialists, but he was put up so that they could use the occasion to spread socialist ideas among the people. Patankar and his friends had 11 guns at that time. In 1951 the Congress government confiscated all their weapons. This meant that he was confined to the locality, since it was dangerous for him to move about unarmed. When he stood for elections, he had to go from place to



**Indumati with her granddaughter**

place to propagandise and we would constantly hear rumours of his having been murdered. Four years after our marriage, he was actually murdered.

*How did that happen ?*

During the administration of the parallel government, the underground activists had tried to suppress the dacoits and ruffians who used to commit atrocities on the poor and extract money from them. One such man was Ramoshi. He used to inform the police about the whereabouts of underground activists. One day, he came to some activists and told them : “I am feeling very remorseful for my behaviour, and for having harassed people. Please forgive me. Now I want to work with you.” They fixed an

appointment with him so that the matter could be discussed. However, they were not sure whether he was telling the truth, so only a few less important activists went to keep the appointment. The leaders like Babuji and Borade Master stayed in hiding at a distance. Ramoshi came with a police contingent. The activists were also prepared, so there was a confrontation and the police party was forced to retreat.

Thus the conflict with these ruffians was a political not a personal one. After national independence, some political opponents of Babuji decided to exploit this conflict. Some of his opponents were now in power in the Congress government. They felt that Patankar was one of the main leaders of the opposition movement in the area, and it was due to his influence that agitations continued to break out. So they decided to get him out of the way, by taking advantage of the old enmity between the socialists and the local ruffians.

On January 24, 1952, some ruffians came and called Patankar from the fields. Ramoshi was among them. They said they wanted to talk to him. He went with them but he never returned. He was kidnapped. The Communist Party, the left Socialists and other leftists held many protest meetings in different areas, in Kasegaon, in Shirad and Satara districts, demanding that the government launch a search for him. He also had several friends among Congress leaders who came and joined these meetings. But not even his body was found. Earlier, one of his friends had also been murdered in this way.

*Did you continue your work after that ?*

No, not till my son grew up and became a doctor.

When Patankar died, my son was only two years old. By then, my mother-in-law was very old. She did a bit of labour in the fields. My father-

in-law was old and unwell, yet his support mattered a great deal to me. I continued teaching at the school.

By this time, the left socialist wing had become the Communist Party and I went along with the communists. After that, I could not do any political work till my son grew up. I had to educate him. I also had to pay back debts of about Rs 10,000 incurred during the election. I used to try to do a little work in the village, as and when possible, but it was not much.

During these years, our family also got involved in a land dispute. The landlord, whose lands my in-laws worked as tenants, wanted to throw them out. This was in 1961, after the new land reform laws had been passed. According to the new laws, we as longstanding tenants became owners of the land. The landlord did not want to acknowledge our claim, so we got involved in a long conflict. He forcibly abducted my father-in-law and made him sign some papers saying that I was not Babuji's legally wedded wife but his mistress. Our enemies in the village took advantage of the situation, and wrote up these slanders in the local papers. The dispute continued from 1961 to 1972. In the end we won, and the land is now ours.

Apart from this, I had no other problems nor did I face any social persecution. Several of Babuji's friends like Sheikh Kaka, Shantaram Garud and B.G. Deshpande gave us support and guidance, especially regarding my son's education. These men remained full time activists, and kept in close touch with my family. They used to live in our house.

*How did you begin to participate in political activity again after a gap of so many years ?*

After Bharat became a doctor, he began to live in Pune where he got involved in Shramik Sangathana work. I with some of his friends began to do the Shramik Sangathana work here in

the village. That is how I got involved once again. Then I met Gail in a Khed Mazdoor conference at Kolhapur, and again at another one in Walwa where I, as a freedom fighter, was asked to preside over a large women's meeting. After Gail and Bharat got married, all three of us began to give all our time to political work. Now that all my difficulties and problems are solved, I can work once more.

*What were the problems that got solved ?*

Our financial problems and my worries regarding my son. Now, I don't need to worry about money.

I get my salary plus some income from the land we own. My nephews supervise the work on the land. When Bharat first became active in Pune, I used to be very worried on his account. He stopped coming home and did not even write letters. Just as my father used to tell me to stay at home and work in my own village, so I too felt that it would be best if Bharat stayed at home and worked in Kasegaon. Once, I went to see him in Bombay, I found that he had become very thin, and looked uncared for. He was wearing shabby, torn clothes and did not have proper shoes. I felt very bad. This was a big worry for me.

When Bharat decided to give up medicine and become a full time political activist, I was confused and upset. Bharat had not actually wanted to become a doctor, but some of Babuji's old friends had persuaded him into choosing this field. Once he had completed his studies, he said he wanted to become a full time activist. I was unhappy and felt that he could do organisational work while practising as a doctor. But he said : "There are plenty of doctors. Even if I give free medicines to the poor, they will not be cured because they do not have food to eat, and are therefore bound to be unhealthy. The true work of a doctor is to find a cure for poverty." He also told me : "When your parents

told you not to leave home, you did not listen to them. You left home and joined the movement. This is the need of the times." We expressed our differences through letters. I knew he was right yet I could not help feeling upset.

Then when he decided to marry Gail, people said: "She is an American. She will go off to America, taking your son with her." This was another worry for me. One month after their marriage, Gail went to America and stayed there a year. This increased my anxiety. After a year, Bharat too went to America and stayed there for about six months. Then both of them came back and started living in Pune. I used to go to their house often. When Gail and I stayed together, her behaviour, her way of thinking dispelled my doubts. I began to feel that she was my daughter. Now that both my son and daughter-in-law have started to live with me in Kasegaon and work here, I feel that everything has turned out well for me. I am very happy.

*Tell me about your work now. Do you think it has led to any improvements ?*

I don't feel there is any improvement. We have been organising the work of Shramik Sangathana (toilers' organisation) for many years now, but the results are not in proportion to the effort put in. Of course, many more people now realise the necessity of organisation but they are still afraid of government repression.

*What are the important issues relating to women you would like to raise through your organisation ?*

The issue of women's unemployment is very important. We have to organise for employment as well as for implementation of the Minimum Wages Act. Women here do not get equal wages for equal work. If a man gets Rs 10 for a job, a woman will get only Rs 5 for the same job. In Kasegaon, there is not much

unemployment. Water is available here, so agriculture is well developed and provides enough employment. But this is not the case in other areas.

In Kasegaon, we have organised protest actions by women on several issues. Once, a shopkeeper tried to rape a 10 year old girl. We demonstrated outside the offender's house and outside the gram panchayat office.

Some years ago, a prostitute from another area married a man in this village and wanted to settle here with him. She and the man were both badly beaten up by people here. We organised a *morcha* against this harassment. She was able to get married and live here.

We also celebrate Savitribai Phule's and other such anniversaries, and do consciousness raising work amongst agricultural labourers. We try to organise them against injustice and against attacks on their rights. Four or five such *morchas* have been organised over the last few years. On the issue of the implementation of minimum wages law, we organised a strike of agricultural labourers.

*Do you think the situation of women has improved after independence ?*

I do not see any real improvement. Perhaps the situation is worse in some ways. At the time of the national movement, there was a certain idealism in the social atmosphere. People tried to follow Gandhi's ideals. For example, *Gandhi lagan* was a simple affair, but now the practice of dowry has spread even amongst the poor. The hold of blind superstition is growing, and is fostered by those in power. It is very difficult to work with women because women have no opinions of their own. Their husbands' opinions become theirs.

There have been some improvements in education. There is a high school in our village. But even

though many girls are studying, they do not learn to think independently. Even educated women, for example, my colleagues in the school, are afraid to subscribe to any *stree mukti* magazine because they feel their husbands will object to it.

*What is the attitude of the villagers towards you and your work?*

They have to acknowledge my presence and my force because I survived for so long. Most women see me as a "communist" who is different from them.

*Have any other women in the village drawn inspiration from you and followed in your footsteps ?*

No. No one. They take the straight path—get some education, get married, and so on. They do not feel the urge to work for society. There are some who work with us, but they do not see the need to devote their lives to this work.

*Do you feel that you have been successful in achieving your aim in life ?*

(She had used the word *dhyeya* to indicate a cause, an aim, and called

herself and others like her *dhyeya-vadi*.)

I have achieved my aim, but I do not think we have achieved independence. When we worked for independence, our aim was that there should be equality in society, that the poor should be able to live like human beings, should get enough food, clothing and education. This aim of ours has not been achieved.

*Then in what sense do you say that your aim has been fulfilled ?*

I feel that my personal aim has been fulfilled but not my political aim.

*What was the personal aim that has been fulfilled ?*

The personal aim was peace and happiness at home.

*But when you set out, you did not see family happiness as your aim, did you ?*

No, I did not. It is true that if one thinks in terms of my aim as I originally envisioned it, it has not been fulfilled. At that time, I never wanted to make home and family my aim. That is why one has to keep working for women's liberation, and organising agricultural labourers. □

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## Birth

*I had never thought  
that the flow of blood  
from cuts on the feet  
through ceaseless treading  
on sharp crags  
would feel like the release  
of a joyful creativity—  
A creativity that does not  
find its fulfilment  
in the ejection  
of an endless row of  
squealing infants  
from a womb that  
wears itself  
to death,  
But one that finds  
its fruition  
in the emergence*

*of a river  
of jostling shoulders  
of women whose faces are lustrous  
with pearls of sweat  
born of a tireless  
striving to dispel  
the boundaries drawn  
for Her.  
In the lash  
of this torrent  
against cold rocks  
stubbornly planted  
in the hardened sands  
of decaying time  
echoes the song  
of an awakening.*

—Usha Kalyanaraman