

INDIGENOUS HEROINES

A Saga of Tribal Women of India

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Alma Grace Barla



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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to all the indigenous tribal women and men of India who have sacrificed their lives to protect 'Mother Earth', indigenous identity and culture; to martyrs of the freedom movement; to the thousands of innocent women, men and children who are victims of violence in the conflict areas of the Northeastern and Central East Indian states; and to those who continue to work to safeguard the fundamental human rights of indigenous peoples by upholding democratic values in line with traditional knowledge systems and best practices.

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GLOSSARY

| |
|---|
| AAP: Aam Aadmi Party |
| AGMS: Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha |
| Ahimsa: Non-violence (Gandhian principle) |
| AI: Amnesty International |
| APSWREIS: Andhra Pradesh Social Welfare Residential Educational Intuitions Society |
| Arjuna Award: The 2nd highest sports awards given by the Govt. of India |
| AVS: Adivasi Vikas Samiti (Society for Tribal Development) |
| BJP: Bharatiya Janata Party |
| CBI: Central Bureau of Investigation |
| Charkha: Spinning wheel |
| Chhotanagpur/Chota Nagpur: It is a plateau in eastern India, which covers much of Jharkhand state as well as adjacent parts of Odisha, West Bengal, Bihar and Chhattisgarh. It is a home to large number of tribal communities. |
| CM: Chief Minister |
| CPI-Maoist: Communist Party of India (Maoist) |
| CSPSA: Chhattisgarh Special Public Security Act |
| Darshan/ Darshana: To see with reverence or devotion |
| DC: District Collector |
| FRA: Forest Rights Act |
| GOI: Government of India |
| Gram Panchayat: Council of Villages, a local self-government organization |
| HI: Hockey India |
| HMI: Himalayan Mountaineering Institute |
| HRLN: Human Rights Law and Network |
| Hul: Popularly referred to Santal Hul (1855-57 Santal Tribal Revolt) meaning movement of liberation |
| IIM: Indian Institutes of Management |
| IIT: Indian Institutes of Information Technology |
| ILO: International Labour Organization |
| INC: Indian National Congress |
| IPC: Indian Penal Code |
| IR: Indian Railways |
| Jani Shikar: Hunting by women |
| JM: Judicial Magistrate |
| JPC: Zeliangrong People's Convention |
| Khadi: Handspun and hand-woven cotton clothes promoted by Gandhi during the freedom struggle as symbol of nationalism, equality and self-reliance. |
| KKJS: Koel Karo Jan Sangathan |

KSTA: Kerala Scheduled Tribes (Restriction of Transfer of Land and Restoration of Alienated Land) Act
 LS: Lok Sabha
 LWE: Left-Wing Extremism. Government of India prefer this phrase for Naxal-related activities and violence
 MA: Master's of Arts
 MLA: Member of Legislative Assembly
 MNREGA: Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act
 MOTA: Ministry of Tribal Affairs
 NCST: National Commission for Scheduled Tribes
 NCW: National Commission for Women
 NDA: National Democratic Alliance (India)
 NHRC: National Human Rights Commission
 NNC: Naga National Council
 NUSRL: National University of Study and Research in Law
 Pachho: Grandmother in Kurukh/Oraon language
 Padma Bhushan: Third highest civilian award given by the Govt. of India
 Padmashree/Padma Shri: The fourth highest civilian award given by GOI
 PESA: Provision of Panchayats Extension in Scheduled Areas Act
 PGAN: Peoples' Global Action Network
 PM: Prime Minister
 RAF: Rapid Action Force
 RTI: Right to Information Act
 Sarpanch: An elected head of a Gram Panchayat
 Sarvodaya: Progress or welfare for all (Gandhian principle)
 Satyagraha: Non-violent resistance or civil disobedience movement adopted and promoted by Mahatma Gandhi during the freedom struggle
 SC: Scheduled Castes
 SDPO: Sub-Divisional Police Officer
 SP: Superintendent of Police
 ST: Scheduled Tribes
 Swadeshi: Meaning self-sufficiency or self-governance, principles of home economy promoted by Gandhi during the freedom struggle
 Swaraj: Self-rule promoted by Gandhi during freedom struggle
 Tamrapatra Award: An award conferred by the Government of India as a token of its appreciation for her contribution to the freedom movement
 Tehsil/Tahsil: An administrative division in Indian states comprised of multiple villages or small towns also referred as 'mandal' or 'taluka'
 UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
 UNPFII: United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
 WAMIP: World Alliance of Mobile Indigenous Peoples
 Zeliangrong: Combined Naga tribes-Zeme, Liangmai and Rongmei, Inpui

FOREWORD

I am indeed delighted to write a foreword for this book, which is an important contribution towards building of a tribal literature and history that have been going among tribes in different parts of country. Ms Barla hails from a humble tribal family in Odisha and like the women of her book; she herself has sailed through hurdles and constraints to be a journalist, writer and researcher. It is indeed a great feat. It is to the credit of Ms. Barla that she conceived this project, an aspect of tribal society and history that has escaped the imagination of those who have been thinking and writing on tribal society and history. It is heartening to find that in writing this book Ms. Barla has not confined to comfort zone of her tribe and tribes she is familiar with or region she hails from. Rather she has crossed this boundary by engaging with women across tribes, region and history.

One of the traditional hallmarks of tribal societies had been the feature of homogeneity and fusion of different social institutions into one another. All members of the community resembled each other as everyone made livelihood from the same occupation, held the similar belief and practice and shared the same knowledge, sentiments and feelings. In short, unlike other societies tribal societies were marked by lack of social differentiation and specialization. And yet the division

of labour has not altogether been absent. Of course they have been elementary as they were based mainly on age and sex. Such forms of division of labour have been evident in tribal societies irrespective of the stage of their development.

As far as India is concerned hunting and food gathering, shifting agriculture and settled agriculture has been the main stages. Of course they have now been opened to wider world and economy and have been going through much transformation. In each of these dominant forms of making a living, division of labour in the form of men and women doing different kind of work have been fairly well entrenched. The differences in sphere of work have had their bearing on social and cultural life resulting in differential access to status, power and wealth, the most valued things life in society. Restricting those valued things of society to some and their denial to others has been the key forms on inequality in society. Although inequality is not so striking in tribal society, it does exist and the most pervasive among them has been the inequality between men and women.

Women in tribal society suffer from denial of rights and privileges that the men enjoy. The denial of heritance in property and participation in decision making process that affect the community and public sphere is the most important among them. Women are also burdened with more responsibilities in comparison to men. They take care of the field and well as home. Indeed much of the work involved in the field whether it relates to shifting or settled is carried out by primarily by women. Men's work is by and large confined to clearing of forest and making it ready for cultivation in case of shifting agriculture. In case of settled agriculture, men's work is generally confined to ploughing and other activities that precede the planting or transplanting. The agricultural operations that follow subsequently are generally carried on by women. In addition to work in the field, women carry on the household chores. Men hardly participate in these works. Thus, women on the one hand experience denial of rights in things

valued in society and on the other suffer burden of field and household work resulting in very little space for self and self fulfilment.

The incorporation of tribes into the colonial rule and administration had far reaching consequences on tribes. To begin with there was loss of autonomy and independence that they had enjoyed so far. There was in addition rampant alienation of land from tribes to non-tribes through such means as fraud, deceit, indebtedness etc. Restriction on access to forest and forest resources introduced under the British rule too had adverse impact on tribes. Alongside there has been assault on their religion, tradition and culture. Dispossession led to an emergence of a new phenomenon of landless class in tribal society. Others suffered shrinkage in their landholding due to alienation of part of their land. This resulted in adverse economic and social conditions resulting in series of revolt and rebellion against the British rule and administration as well as people from the plain who had been the key players in dispossession of tribes from their lands.

Such processes have not come to halt in post-independence India. Rather it has continued as a part of nation building project all through the post-independence era. The process has however gained momentum following the process of liberalization and globalization, which has very little to do with the nation building process. All these have adversely impacted tribes and hence there has been since last few decades wide spread resistance and struggle against the process of dispossession and denial of rights in forest. In this struggle, the role of men has been more wide spread and pronounced but women's role has not altogether been absent. As observed earlier, women do face certain disadvantage within tribal society but the larger economic and political process has impacted them more adversely than those of the internal structure of the society. Thus they have been faced with many fold disadvantages. One stems from outside the tribal society

and the other from within. Despite such constraint and shrunk space, there have been women who had/have overcome those constraints and shown path to other by their exemplary work.

The resistance and struggle being waged by the tribes have thrown off number of women leaders in different parts of the country and different times. This has been remarkable development and achievement given the constraints and hurdles that they have to overcome. It is high time that we trace them and bring them to the forefront of tribal society and history. Ms. Barla has portrayed life stories of some of these brave and courageous indigenous women. The singular contributions of indigenous women like Rani Gaidinliu, Helen Lepcha, Putalimay Tamang, and Dashriben Chaudhri in India's freedom struggle are worth naming. Other band of indigenous women like Gaura Devi, Tulasi Munda, Dayamani Barla, Soni Sori, C.K. Janu and Vasamalli belong to brand of indigenous women who spearheaded the movement for protection and promotion of the rights (civil, social, economic, political and human) of the tribal communities. There have been others such as Sumrai Tete, Asunta Lakra, Jyoti Sunita Kullu who have brought laurels to India by playing hockey at the international levels for the nation. Yet another brave young girl, Poorna Malavath, defeated all odds in the Himalayas and became the first ever 13 year-old mountaineer to plant the national flag on the Mount Everest.

I hope Ms. Barla's work and endeavour will inspire many more young generation educated youth especially the women to tread the path shown by Ms Barla and the heroines she portrays in her book.

Virginius Xaxa,
Professor and Deputy Director,
Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Guwahati, India

23 November 2015

INTRODUCTION

It was a wonderful evening in the summer of 2006. In the fading light of the setting sun, golden-blue rays stretching long and thin fell through the glistening leaves of the mango grove. Noisy *myna* birds were roosting in roadside trees. Behind our house, there was a rock pond made by the villagers for irrigation purposes.

Sitting at the edge of the pond, I took in the beautiful sights of my village with thickly planted trees, colourful and exquisite houses built in a perfect line and roofed with bright red and grey clay tiles. While men built the rafters, women would paint the walls with red, white and grey clay. In the middle of the village, a wide space was left for the *akhra*, where people gather together to dance, sing and celebrate various festivals.

On this particular evening, I could see kitchen wood-smoke rising through the roofs and forming thin, white layers on the lower sky beneath the mountain and forest range. From the Ranibeda hill lock, a crowd of women approached the village singing and dancing. It was an unusual scene. Clad in men's shirts, trousers, *dhoti*, *lungi*, and *pagri* (turban), they were returning from "*jani shikar*" (hunting by women) with their catch of few birds and chickens. I joined the youth to welcome

them at the village entrance. The air was soon filled with music and festive celebration. Familiar folk songs and *mandar* (local drum) beats echoed through the hills and valleys late into the night.

Song (1) बारो बछाने जनी शिकार, जनी का मुड़े राजा पगरी बांधै । 2
नांव जगाले राजा जनी शिकार, जनी का मुड़े राजा पगरी बांधै । 2

Song (2) हुदिम कोय भौरो पेल्लो, बली कोंडा गुसन बल्लू रःई ।
जनी शिकार कालोय होले, बली कोंडा गुसन बल्लू रःई ।

Song (3) पांचो पहार बीचे शिकार खेले गेली, कोई नहीं लगे संग साथ,
पांचो पहार बीचे शिकार खेले गेली, कोई नहीं लगे संग साथ,

गांवे रे चइतरा बुझे गेली, बंदुक के देली ओटंगाय,
रांची तो सहर बुले गेली, बंदुक के चोरा हइर लेल, हो ।
छोंडा—छोंड़ी न पोइछी आलैं रे, बुढा—बुढी देइख आलैं ।

Although I knew the meaning of these songs, which are all meant to publicly acknowledge the contribution of women to sustaining the tribal community, it was difficult to grasp the story expressed in them. A number of rousing questions kept coming to me. Did this really happen? When did it happen? Ultimately, my curiosity led me to Suse *paccho* (in Kurukh and Oraon, we fondly refer to older women or grandmother figures as *pachho*).

Suse *pachho*, in her late 80s, knew numerous seasonal songs, dance steps and the *mandar* rhythm. She explained to me the meaning of the first song which, freely translated into English, goes:

The festival of *jani shikar* (hunting by women) comes every twelve years. The king (can also be *pahan* or village head) ties turbans on the women's heads.... We went out to

nine forests and mountains for hunting. The king ties turbans on the women's heads...

Second song: A man is telling the woman, O black girl, if you are going for *jani shikar* (hunting by women), Take the *baluwa* (an axe) kept behind the door in the corner...

Third song: We went around five mountains and hills for hunting, Some people (women) came, some did not..., (When) we knew a deer came out into the village, we pulled our trigger, But (when) we went to Ranchi city, our guns were stolen. (When) we returned from hunting, girls and boys did not come to receive us, But the elders saw and came to welcome us ...

Paccho further narrated the origin of *jani shikar* according to Kurukh/Oraon cultural history:

Kurukh people once lived around Rohstasgarh or Ruidas kingdom (on the Kaimur Hills, now in Bihar, which they claim to be their early settlement). Rohtasgarh being the capital, enemies tried to capture it but failed. Singidai, Kailidai and Champudai were three brave young princesses. From a milkmaid, Lundri by name, the enemies came to know that they could win against the Rohtasgarh army only on the day of the Sarhul festival, as their men folk would be dead drunk on that feast day. So they mounted an attack for the second time. When all the men were drunk, Singidai called all the women to put on men's dress, take up arms like swords, spears and samats (used for rice pounding) and counter attack the enemies. Three times they were attacked but they drove the enemy away. Later, the milkmaid told the enemies that they were defeated by women and not by men. They once again attacked the fort in the dead of night when the tribals were unprepared for this sudden attack. Many

were killed. The fort was seized and the tribal king and the people were led out by Singidai into a forest through a secret tunnel of the fort.

This legend gave birth to *jani shikar*, which takes place once every twelve years. To commemorate their bravery and victory against the enemies, women leave their homes on a hunting spree for one day.

My summer holidays were over. I left my village and returned to Delhi, but the spirit of *jani shikar* stayed with me for days. I started looking for literature on the tale but found very few works.

In his work, “*Tribal Origins and Culture, with special reference to tribes of Chotanagpur*”, Mahli Livins Tirkey, former Senior Research Officer in the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, writes that Sarhul, which is the biggest festival of tribals celebrated to mark the beginning of New Year, dates back to around 600-700 BC.¹ Francis Pereira states in “*The Faith Tradition of the Kunrukhar (Uraons)*” that the *Kunrukhar (Kurukh)* had their capitals at Banaras, Patna, Gaya, Rohtasgarh and Pipragarh (Pipni Kanan). Rohtasgarh was the most important fortified capital.² Some writers say that tribal Mundas and Kurukh were attacked by the Mughal military; however, this is historically untraceable. This event in Rohtasgarh took place c. 700 BC, whereas the Muslims first landed in the Indian soil from Arab at Karachi in Sindh only in 800 A.D.³

Although the beginning of *jani shikar* or hunting by women cannot be accurately traced, it illustrates the position of women in adivasi society, their skills and bravery, and non-discrimination. These *jani shikar* songs have been sung and played by the adivasis of Chhotanagpur for decades. Traditionally, hunting is widely considered to be men's work because it involves a lot of violence and physical strength. This

festival, however, advocates equality among men and women and could thus be one of the most symbolic celebrations. The oral literatures of different tribes possess a large body of such intriguing folk tales, ballads, music and lyrics.

Radical feminist thought and feminism emerged in India as a political ideology to be reckoned with and became a sociological discourse in the 1960s and 1970s but it had already existed in tribal society. It was part of their culture and lifestyle, passed on from generation to generation. They do not follow it out of compulsion, compassion or because they have received any education. It is part of their culture and tradition and they have lived it for many years.

For example, in most Indian families, a son is often seen as an “asset” as he can support the family socially and economically while a daughter is viewed as a “liability” or “loss”⁴ as she will be married off to another family, the parents will have to pay a great deal of money as dowry and she will not contribute financially to her parents. Sons are therefore often celebrated. While female foeticide or sex-selective abortion and a declining sex ratio has been a matter of concern in India for years, several tribal communities have been far ahead of the rest of the country in maintaining a healthy child sex ratio. Despite the common belief that education will improve attitudes to female children, 2011 census data shows that the child sex ratio (girls for every 1,000 boys aged 0-6) is 957 for Scheduled Tribes as compared to 910 for others. Similarly, while India's sex ratio is 940 overall, among the Scheduled Tribes it is 990. Furthermore, a recent report submitted by the Welfare Department, Govt. of Jharkhand to the Tribes Advisory Council (Jharkhand) reveals that eight tribes have more women than men: Santhal, Ho, Oraon, Kharia, Munda, Sauria-Pahariya, Mal Paharia and Banjara.⁵

The main purpose of writing this book is to rectify the

historical accounts, and to recognize and record the invaluable contributions of India's indigenous tribal women to community and nation building; to learn to appreciate and broaden the understanding of indigenous and tribal peoples' rich traditions, culture and lifestyle rather than merely considering them as primitive and backward.

India ratified the International Labour Organization's Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Populations, 1957 (No.107) in 1958, and voted in favour of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 2007, which sets out the individual and collective rights of the world's 370 million indigenous peoples, calls for the preservation and strengthening of their cultural identities, and emphasizes their right to pursue development that is in keeping with their own needs and aspirations and relies upon free, prior and informed consent.

India has the largest indigenous and tribal population in Asia, comprising over 600 distinct communities, with over 80 million people speaking a number of different languages. As a legally recognized social group, the Constitution refers to them as Scheduled Tribes on account of their deprivation and centuries of exclusion. While the government avoids the term 'indigenous' when referring to these communities, they are popularly known as tribals and adivasis (meaning original inhabitants, and indigenous). The government of India claims that, due to its long and complex history of migration and exchange and mixing of cultural, physical traits, it is not possible to identify any group as "indigenous" in relation to other groups and that therefore all ethnic groups currently living in India are equally "indigenous".⁶ However, in this book, the use of the term 'indigenous peoples' refers to all the major scheduled tribes as recognized under the Constitution of India.

Although the status of tribal women in India has been

acknowledged as being better than that of their non-tribal counterparts, they still face multiple types of violence, discrimination and injustice due to their distinct identities, sex, gender and ethnicities. Many tribal women, both literate and illiterate, rural and urban, experience multiple forms of discrimination in public places, educational institutions, the workplace, and even within the political and judicial systems. Despite poverty and limited opportunities many of these women, fighting against all odds, add glory to the nation by demonstrating excellence in various fields. Unfortunately, they remain little known to the country. Many grassroots champions who have worked relentlessly to promote and protect the environment, land and natural resources, culture, customary laws, and languages (which are key sources of indigenous and tribal peoples' survival) go unrecognized. In this book I explore and gather the life stories of such extraordinary tribal women.

The first part of the book gives an historical account of tribal women's involvement in the struggle for freedom, leadership and the legacy of bravery during Mughal and Colonial rule. It also provides a short description of their involvement in and contribution to the fields of politics, education, art and culture, sports, institution-building, economic development and more in the Post-independence era.

The second part of the book portrays the life stories of four revolutionary leaders, social reformers and freedom fighters. Naga (Zeliangrong) leader **Rani Gaidinliu** was a visionary, a reformer, and a guerrilla warrior who bravely fought against British colonization in the Manipur and Naga region. As a teenager she was imprisoned for 14 years, making her one of India's longest incarcerated political prisoners. She was named as a 'Rani' (queen) by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who came to learn about her bravery and visited her in Shillong jail.

Among the many prominent Gorkha freedom fighters of Sikkim and Darjeeling Hills, **Helen Lepcha** and **Putalimaya Tamang** are credited as being people's leaders who discontinued their schooling to lead mass mobilizations. They were imprisoned many times for leading protests and burning foreign goods. Helen and her friends were known to have helped Indian nationalist and prominent freedom fighter Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose escape from house arrest in Kurseong and migrate to Germany through Kabul.⁷

During the freedom struggle, Mahatma Gandhi exhorted women to take part in the Satyagraha (non-violent civil disobedience or fighting with peace) movement on a par with men. It is said that of the 30,000 people who courted arrest during the Salt Satyagraha against the British salt monopoly, 17,000 were women volunteers. In this period, when Gandhiji visited Vedcchi in Gujarat, the young **Dashriben Chaudhari** wanted to place a garland around Gandhi but could not reach him. To her surprise, Gandhiji lifted her up so that she could garland him. Gandhiji looked at the jewelry she was wearing and asked,

“What are these?”

She said, “This is my jewelry. My *mama* (uncle) got them made for me.”

Gandhi said, “I see. But *beta* (child), we must live the life of a *sadhu* (saint). Will you take these off?”

“Yes *Bapuji*. I will take them off.”⁸

Immediately she asked her father to take them off. From that moment on, Dashriben never wore anything except her own white hand woven *khadi saree*⁹ throughout her life. She even taught Kasturba, the wife of Gandhiji, how to read and write in Yerawada jail.

As the spirit of nationalism and freedom spread beyond territorial boundaries, thousands of oppressed poor, dalits and adivasis from the hills and plains came together for the struggle, expecting that the defeat of the British would usher in a new democratic era.

On 13 December 1946, Jawaharlal Nehru (prominent leader of the Indian National Congress and the first Prime Minister of Independent India) introduced the "Objectives Resolution" by laying down the underlying principles of the Constitution for debate in the Constitution Assembly. The Resolution proclaimed that the soon-to-be-free nation would be an “Independent Sovereign Republic” guaranteeing all citizens “justice, social, economic, and political; equality of status; of opportunity, and before the law; freedom of expression, belief, faith, worship, vocation, association, and action, subject to law and public morality”. Further it went on to say that “adequate safeguard shall be provided for minorities, backward and tribal areas, depressed and other backward classes...”¹⁰ Dr. Rajendra Prasad was Chair of the Constitution Assembly during the week-long debate. After many staunch leaders, including S. P. Mukherjee, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Hansa Mehta and Somnath Lahri, had made their statements, Jaipal Singh Munda, popularly known as *Marang Gomke* or “the great leader” of adivasis of Chhotanagpur, an Oxford returning educationalist, Parliamentarian and a visionary said,

“I rise to speak on behalf of millions of unknown hordes-yet very important- hordes of unrecognized warriors of freedom, the original people of India who have variously been known as backward tribes, primitive tribes, criminal tribes and everything else, Sir, I am proud to be a Jungli, that is the name by which we are known in my part of the country... As a Jungli, as an Adivasi, I am not expected to understand the legal intricacies of the Resolution. But my

common sense tells me, the common sense of my people tells me that every one of us should march in that road of freedom and fight together. Sir, if there is any group of Indian people that has been shabbily treated it is my people. They have been disgracefully treated, neglected for the last 6,000 years. The history of the Indus Valley civilization, a child of which I am, shows quite clearly that it is the newcomers-most of you here are intruders as far as I am concerned-it is the newcomers who have driven away my people from the Indus Valley to the jungle fastnesses. This Resolution is not going to teach adivasis democracy. You cannot teach democracy to the tribal people; you have to learn democratic ways from them. They are the most democratic people on earth. What my people require, Sir, is not adequate safeguards as Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru has put it. They require protection from Ministers that are in position today. We do not ask for any special protection. We want to be treated like every other Indian.”¹¹

Six and half decades have passed but Jaipal Singh Munda's demand and the adivasis' dream of a free India remained unfulfilled thus far. They have been continually exploited and fractured, economically, politically, socially and culturally. Those who were able to take advantage of the new economic and education frontiers reaped comparatively more of the fruits of development while a large section of tribals and forest dwellers could not do so, as they were not adequately prepared to deal with the new challenges.

In the post-independence period, while widespread progress in the fields of production, industrialization, agriculture, communication, education, science and technology systems

was shaping India, adivasis were still fighting for their freedom—freedom from poverty, from exploitation, from ignorance, and from illiteracy. In the name of national development, their land, forests and livelihood resources were being absorbed by industries and mining giants. Continued destruction of forests and natural resources for industrial purposes has become one of the biggest threats to their survival.

Given this state of affairs, indigenous heroes arose with the aim of carrying on the legacy and ethos of their elders. **The third part** of the book portrays such heroes. They talk about their passion and determination to obtain education while fighting hunger, their sleepless nights, nights spent in railway stations studying under the platform light, discrimination, social stigma, police atrocities, life in jail and their fight against oppressive state mechanisms, challenging the corporate mafias and the Maoist rebels. They also tell of their passion for forest conservation and protection of *jal-jangal-jamin* (water-land-forest) indigenous identity, language and culture, various struggles and the joy of their success.

Born exactly a month before India obtained independence, **Tulasi Munda** would have hardly understood what 'independence' or 'freedom' meant for the people of India. But she grew up with her own notion of freedom, which included freeing hundreds of children working in mining areas, and bringing good fortune to her people by dispelling the darkness of ignorance through literacy. As a young child who once worked in coal mines to support her family, Tulasi triggered a silent revolution in Odisha. Today, she has transformed more than 20,000 young lives by establishing 17 teaching centers in Keonjhar district of Odisha.

In the 1970s and 1980s, when the Chipko Movement of the Himalayan region became one of the biggest movements in the history of environmental conservation, it attracted worldwide

attention. Reni village became a hot spot for intellectuals, researchers, NGOs, media and even political parties. However, they often portrayed the adivasi women who initiated Chipko as 'poor' and 'rural' but they were neither! They were successful wool traders, operating across the Indo-Tibet and China border until the Government of India sealed the border in 1963, following the Indo-China War. Women contributed to their traditional occupations, family and community affairs. After the death of her husband, **Gaura Devi** took up the family business while raising her small child. She also became president of the women's group in her village. When all men had gone to the district headquarters to settle the Indo-China War compensation sums, Gaura Devi gathered the women of her village and encouraged them to protect trees from being cut down in the Himalayas by logging companies. She unwaveringly stood before them and said,

“We are going to hug the trees. If you cut the trees down, first you will have to hit us with your axes!”

Dayamani Barla, better known as the 'Iron Lady of Jharkhand' and **C. K. Janu** of Wayanad, Kerala have been at the forefront of the people's movement against land dispossession, displacement and other injustices. Like many tribals, Dayamni's family was cheated out of their ancestral land. From humble beginnings, she worked as a maid to pay her way through university. As a young student and later a journalist, she stood for truth and justice. As one of the main leaders of the people's movement, she campaigned against the construction of the Koel Karo Dam, a hydro-electric project near Ranchi which would have displaced 2.5 lakhs (0.25 million) people from the region. She was also one of the leading forces in the movement that prevented the global mining giant Arcelor Mittal from plundering 12,000 acres of land, uprooting 40 villages and 70,000 people from their

homes. Dayamani and Janu knew the pain and suffering of life without land, and for the sake of thousands of adivasis and landless poor, both suffered torture, false criminal charges and even imprisonment.

In 2012, when the brutal Delhi gang rape incident sent shock waves around the world and led to a series of protests across the country, another daughter of India, **Soni Sori**, a school teacher, was languishing in different jails of Maoist-hit Chhattisgarh, brutally tortured and raped by police officials. From behind bars, she saw her school collapse, her world crumble, and the breakup of what was left of her family.¹² She saw young girls with their nipples chopped off who had been given electric shocks in jail. While trying to recover from the trauma, she heard that her alleged torturer, a police officer, had been given a bravery award by the government¹³ for anti-maoist operation. “Prisoner of conscience” Soni Sori dared to speak out and fight back, however, not only for herself but for the thousands of adivasis whose lives have been ruined and who are languishing in different jails throughout India.

According to the National Crime Records Bureau of India, reported incidents of crime against women increased 6.4% during 2012, and a crime against a woman is committed every 3 minutes.¹⁴ Indigenous communities, who once lived peacefully in harmony with nature, have been largely affected by the terror of all types of violence.

In this state of affairs, **Vasamalli Kurdtozn**, a daughter of the Blue Mountains (Nilgiris) of Southern India, advocates the message of non-violent culture that the Toda people have been practicing and preserving for ages.

The last part of the book gives a brief account of the contribution of the Chhotanagpur region to Indian sports, particularly in the field of hockey. Adivasis of Chhotanagpur

have made a special place in Indian hockey, stemming from the days of Jaipal Singh Munda, who led India in the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics and won the first ever Gold medal for the country. He was the first Indian student to be conferred an 'Oxford Blue' by Oxford University for his contribution to hockey (as an Oxford student he captained the Indian team). Continuing his legacy, several top tribal players have turned out to be champions.

Tribal girls have been a part of the women's national hockey team since the 1990s, and constitute a majority of the team, even today. As naturally gifted players, these girls mostly come from poor families and rural villages. Basic things like running water, electricity, roads, transportation systems, proper education and health care centers are uncommon in their areas, let alone sports facilities. In such adverse situations, their success can be understood through the life stories of former national captains **Sumrai Tete**, **Jyoti Sunita Kullu** and **Asunta Lakra**, the real '*Chak De India Girls*' (meaning 'Go India/Come on India' used for cheering on hockey on India, with reference to the popular Bollywood film *Chak De! India*).

The last story displays the breathtaking expedition of Poorna Malavath – the world's youngest woman to conquer Mount Everest. For 52 days, she trekked through snow, rocks, freezing temperatures, blustering winds and icefall. She saw six dead bodies during her journey but continued to persevere and scaled the peak. At the age of just 13, this daughter of a farm labourer set an example to the whole world, showing that when given equal opportunities, underprivileged children can excel anywhere.

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PART - I

TRIBAL WOMEN CHAMPIONS IN NATION BUILDING

The entire history of India's Freedom Movement is a saga of bravery, sacrifice and political acumen on the part of thousands of men and women of our country. The movement also saw the mass participation of women on an unprecedented scale but, unfortunately, several of them remain invisible, unknown and unsung. A few women, like Rani Lakshmi Bai, Awadh Begum Hazrat Mahal, Rani Durgawati, Sarojini Naidu, Madam Bhikaji Cama, Sarala Devi, Suchita Kriplani, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Annie Besant, Aruna Asaf Ali, Usha Mehta, Kasturba Gandhi, Kamala Nehru and Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, made it into the history books and literature. They mostly came from either royal descent or elite, educated, middle class families, women whose fathers, husbands or brothers were active in social, religious or political associations. In contrast, there were innumerable women with little to no literacy, from poor families, who became involved in the struggle with great commitment and

unfathomed spirit. They were brave, potential leaders but they lay buried unnoticed in history.

Tribal women and men of India also have a long history of heroic struggles against the East India Company, British colonial rule and the oppressive feudal landlords. Tribal communities throughout the country were the precursors of the freedom struggle; they had raised their bows and arrows long before the Sepoy Mutiny (1857-58), known as 'India's First War of Independence'. They never turned away from the battlefield and fought until the end. To name just a few of these major battles and rebellions, there was the *Halba* tribal uprising in Bastar of Chhattisgarh [1774-1779]; the *Pahariya* Revolt of Rajmahal Hills [1766-1778] and *Tamars* of Chhotanagpur [1798, 1794-95]; the tribal uprising of Chotanagpur region [1800-1895], the great *Santal Hul* or Rebellion [1855-56]; the *Gond* uprising in Bastar [1842]; the *Bhil* [1809-1907] and *Koli* uprising [1784-85, 1818] in western India; the uprising of the *Synteng* of Jaintia Hills [1860-1862], *Mishmi* [1827, 1836], *Khasi* [1819], *Lushai* [1842, 1844, 1860] in North East India [1879, 1932] and many more.

Although the historical records give little description of tribal people and their powerful resistance to the Mauryan emperor Ashoka's invasion during the great Kalinga War of modern Odisha (one of the most famous wars of world history, occurring in 262-261 BC), some folktales tell of their participation in the battle. According to folklore, the symbol III (both in vertical and horizontal) tattooed on the forehead of Oraon and Khadia women signifies their victory in a battle, although its meaning is not clear.¹ So also the geometric facial tattoos of Desia and Kutia Kondha/Kondh women of Odisha and bordering states symbolize their resistance to the exploitative outsiders, kings and his men, who often picked up beautiful, good looking women and sexually exploited them.²



Oraon woman



Kondh woman

During their fight against colonial rule, tribal women, young girls and boys took it as their duty to stand along side the men and they actively participated in a war that would determine their identity and territory. The significant roles played by tribal women were no less than those of men. In the history of the tribal movement of Chhotanagpur, in eastern India spirited, women warriors like Jhano, Phulo, Champi, Sali, Kaili Dai etc. are fondly remembered for their bravery. During the *Paharia* resistance, for example, Rani Shaveshwari raised the banner of revolt in 1781 against the British.³

According to the available official sources, tribal women were very much visible during the uprising of 1855-56, known as the great *Santal Hul* or *hool* (movement of liberation). Santals were freedom-loving people who lived in the southern part of the Chhotanagpur plateau and tilled the land for their livelihood. However, under the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793, the lands which the Santals had been cultivating traditionally passed to the *zamindars* (landlords or tax collectors). The Santals then shifted to villages in the hills of Raj Mahal but these lands were also claimed by European planters for the cultivation of indigo. This brought them into confrontation with the British. The construction of railways in the northern areas also disturbed the tribal habitat. Railway officials, landlords and moneylenders humiliated the tribals and abused their women, besides inflicting all kinds of

atrocities on them. Slowly, this created unrest among the people and this turned into armed revolt. Under the leadership of the visionary Murmu brothers (Sidho, Kanhu, Chand and Bhairav) and their sisters Phulo and Jhano Murmu of Bhagnadih village in Sahibganj district (present Jharkhand), nearly 30,000 men and women armed with axes, spears, bows and arrows gathered in Maghnadihi and declared the establishment of Santal state and self-rule, which meant that no *thanedar* or *hakim* (police or judge) could rule over them. They took an oath to fight against the British rulers and their agents to the last breath. They primarily attacked and raided the houses of exploiting moneylenders, *zamindars* or land-tax collectors and notorious policemen who were the cause of their losses and degradation.⁴ Nearly 15-20,000 Santals were killed and, finally, the *Hul* was suppressed with 14,000 troops armed with modern weapons led by General Llyod and Brigadier General Bird, although some outbreaks continued until 1957.⁵

Santal folklore is full of praise for women like Phulo and Jhano, who were said to have killed 21 soldiers.⁶ While the men carried out attacks, women acted as spies and frequently supplied the men with accessories, food, tobacco, salt and other requirements through their daring and by bearing British torture. Some old women were held in high respect in the council of rebels. The villages of (exploitative) moneylenders and land-tax collectors were sometimes plundered by small bodies of 20 or 30 men who came with their women and children and regularly cleaned out the places.⁷ The Magistrate of Birbhum speaks of Santal women who accompanied a Santal force that had gone to plunder the village of Deocha. The following women were arrested on charges of plundering in the company of Ram Manjhi: Raj Barooka, Radha, Heera, Tara, Monee, Rasoo and Bhookten Bhowanee, all belonging to the same family.⁸ A woman was reported as being in charge of a house deep in the jungle (near Deoghar) in which plundered

property was stocked.⁹

Santal women underwent a lot of suffering for their participation in the *Hul*. They were placed under arrest, sentenced to different terms of imprisonment and lodged in female wings of the jails in the most insanitary conditions. Of those who were taken prisoner in the encounter at Mahespur, several were women,¹⁰ many with their children, including infants. The documents of the Judicial Proceedings of Bengal mention the names of two women, Radha and Heera, who received serious injuries while accompanying a raiding party and they also note the deaths of women and children due to long confinements in jails under unhygienic conditions. Convicts were sometimes as young as ten or fourteen. Their offences were categorized as serious crimes and consequently given rigorous punishment of three to six years in prison.¹¹ A woman prisoner in Birbhum jail was in such a desperate state of health that she could not be brought before the court.¹² There was also another Santal woman in Birbhum jail with her three children, and it was reported that she had already undergone four months of imprisonment, and a boy of some 15 years of age had been confined to jail for one year.¹³

The factual report of Deputy Commissioner Mr. H. E. Streatfield mentioned an encounter at Etkedih during the Birsa *Munda* Movement (under the leadership of Birsa Munda between 1895-1900) when Maki, the wife of one of the prominent tribal leaders, Gaya Munda, and his two daughters-in-law fought with weapons such as '*lathi*' (heavy bamboo sticks), '*tangi*' (used for wood cutting) and '*dauli*' (used for grass cutting). His three daughters Thigi, Nagi and Lembu fought vigorously with swords, axes and '*tangi*' until their weapons were taken and they were over powered. They had to fight with their kids in one hand and their weapons in the other.¹⁴ According to Streatfield, Maki was an old but furious lady who had injured

the *daroga* (police), Altaf Hussein, by throwing an axe at him. He further describes these women as ferocious, stubborn, and mad, but also brave.¹⁵

This kind of spirit made the Deputy Commissioner highly apprehensive towards other women.¹⁶ The visible evidence of women's participation in the Sail Rakab revolt (in Khunti district, Jharkhand) was the turning point for the British, who started to recognize the seriousness of the situation. Streatfield had to rush to Khunti with two companies of armed soldiers to suppress the mass struggle. The British forces attacked the Mundas heavily, with indiscriminate firing similar to the 'Jallianwala Bagh Massacre' of Punjab (1919), killing several hundred people. The whole hill was littered with dead bodies. In fact, the British soldiers got so annoyed that they kept shooting, even at fleeing rebels, including women, against the orders of the Commissioner to shoot only in self-defence. Hundreds of people were killed in the massacre and many of the wounded were buried alive. Among those who were shot dead were the wives of Bankan Munda, Majhia Munda and Dungdung Munda of Jiuri.¹⁷ Sometimes British soldiers were said to have found it difficult to distinguish between men and women from a distance due to their long hair.

The incident at Sail Rakab did not deter the strong resolve of Birsa's followers, including women. Another source on the Birsa Movement mentions two rebel tribal women, Champi and Sali, as being among the most trusted ones. Even though a reward of Rs. 500 was offered to anyone who would hand Birsa Munda over to the British authorities, both remained silent to the end.¹⁷ During the Tana Bhagat Movement (1914, Bihar) led by Jatra Tana Bhagat, a follower of Mahatma Gandhi, people opposed the payment of taxes to the British. When Jatra Bhagat was arrested, Deomani Bandhani continued the movement against the oppressive *zamindars*-tax collectors by

providing effective leadership.¹⁹

In western and central India, the *Bhils* have fought valiantly against all types of exploitation by money lenders, rich landlords and British officials. Men and women fought shoulder to shoulder against them but, unfortunately, this has been little documented. In the mid-19th century, due to famine and other conditions resulting in a significant decline in agricultural production, the British refused to exempt farmers from the taxes. When the Bhil farmers protested, they were beaten up and imprisoned. Sursibai, a resident of Panchmohli village of the present-day district of Barwani in Madhya Pradesh, organized nearly 150 women. They vowed to Goddess *Nagri Mata* that they would not rest until they had chased the British from the region. Sursibai and her son Bhima formed an army of both men and women. They looted nearly Rs. 7 lakhs (0.7 million) from the British, which was forcefully collected from local traders of Sendhwa town stating that it belonged to the poor Bhil farmers. In 1859, when a battle took place in Panchmohli, Sursibai's village, Bhima managed to escape while Sursibai and others were arrested and imprisoned in Mandleshwar. The British tortured Sursibai to obtain information about Bhima but she resisted and refused to give any information. As a result she was deprived of food and water and died on 28 February 1859. The death of Sursibai led to a revolt inside the jail which had to be suppressed with military force. Bhima continued his fight from hideouts but was captured on 2 April 1867 and hanged.

Kalibai, a teenage Bhil girl from Dungarpur village of Rajasthan, became a young martyr when she tried to protect her teacher and was shot by the soldiers of feudal rulers in the 1940s. Kalibai was a student at a school run by Dungarpur Sevak Sangh (DSS), established by Gandhians. When the Quit India Movement was announced, under pressure from the

British, the Prince of Dungarpur ordered the closure of schools in Dungarpur. His forces mercilessly beat up the workers of DSS and sent them to jail. On 19 June 1947, police forces went to close down another school in Rastapal village that was being run from a house belonging to Nanabhai Khat. When Nanabhai refused to close the school, he was beaten to death. After the death of Nanabhai, Sengabhai Bhil (who had continued to teach the children) was targeted by the police. The police beat him until he fell unconscious, then tied him to their truck, and dragged him down the road. Shocked by this torture inflicted on her teacher, Kalibai ran towards the truck in an attempt to cut the ropes. The police warned her not to run after the vehicle but she did not listen and tried to save her teacher. The soldiers subsequently shot her in the back. Kalibai fell down unconscious and later died in a hospital in Dungarpur.²⁰ This incident created a massive uproar, and 12,000 people armed with bows, arrows and swords and their traditional drums, entered Dungarpur town. They charged the prison and released the imprisoned leaders. Later the villagers constructed a statue in Rastapal in memory of the brave 13-year-old girl Kalibai, and her martyrdom day is commemorated every year. She is known by everyone, young and old, as “भील जाती का बिरंगनी बालिका” (Child Hero, Pride of Bhils).

Gond queen Durgawati of Garh-Mandal ruled the Gondwana Kingdom with her wisdom and ability, and bravely defended her territory from Muslim conquerors in 1564. In southern India, **Kurichiyas** of Kerala under the leadership of Talakkar Chandu, and Nilli, a separate army of women, fought against the British army to the last drop of their blood. Talakkar Chandu was caught and hanged to death.

A great number of people from the Himalayan and Northeastern region also joined India's freedom struggle and sacrificed their lives. The **Gorkhas**²¹ who took part in the Non-Cooperation Movement, such as Dal Bahadur Giri, Partiman

Singh Lama, Savitri Devi aka Helen Lepcha, Putalimaya Tamang, Gaga Tshering, Agam Singh Giri, Man Bahadur Giri, Pushpa Kumar Ghishing, Bhagat Bir Tamang and more, are legendary to this day.

The **Lepchas** are known to be the earliest settlers of Sikkim but their contribution to India's freedom struggle was not clear until extensive research was undertaken, in 2010, by the Sikkim chapter of the Bharatiya Gorkha Parisangh. During their visit to South Sikkim, researchers established links and unearthed facts regarding the elusive freedom fighter, the late Helen Lepcha, and met her family members. They saw the *Tamrapatra* (freedom fighter award) she had received from the Government of India as a token of its appreciation for her contribution to the freedom movement. The team also visited the ruins of her birthplace and a *chorten* (monument) at Gumpa Dara village, for which she used to contribute money annually for maintenance. A century-old pear (*Nashpati*) tree bears testimony to this faded chapter of history at her ancestral house.²²

From the Northeastern states, More Jiba, Haipou Jadonang, Roupiani, Gaidinliu, and Taji Mideren etc. fought actively against the British. This region also has amazing tales of the heroism of tribal women. Rani Kalindi of **Chakma** Kingdom [1832 to 1873], in undivided British Bengal in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, struggled relentlessly against colonization to maintain tribal autonomy.

In Lushai Hills (part of present-day Mizoram and Tripura), when **Mizo** Chiefs, including widow chiefs, were in a dilemma and forced to negotiate with and make certain adjustments with the colonial government, many women chiefs, such as Ropuiliani, Pi Buki, Lalhlupuii, Rothangpuii, Vanhnuaitangi, Laltheri, Darbilhi, Neihpuithangi, Pawibawia Nu, Dari, Thangpuii, Pakuma Rani and Zawlchuai emerged to fight

against colonialism. In the late 19th century, after the death of her husband, Ropuiliani became the first woman Mizo Chief in the recorded history of Mizoram who refused to acknowledge the British authority. As a result she was imprisoned in 1893 in Lunglei and was later transferred to a jail in Rangamati, in present-day Bangladesh, where she died in January 1894. Her body was taken home by her son, who was also imprisoned with her. Although Mizo is a patriarchal society, Ropuiliani managed to establish her hegemony over nine villages in south Mizoram. She was the chief of a village called Denlung, situated near Hnahthial in southern Mizoram. The village still exists today.

IN POST-INDEPENDENT INDIA, over time and by fighting against all odds, tribal women have excelled and contributed to various fields. Over the decades, rural tribal women have played a vital role in protecting forests, and sustainably managing India's forests, land, and water, sustainable agriculture and food security, local self-governance, community health management, promotion of education, eradicating poverty and economic self-reliance through self-help groups and the preservation and transmission of traditional knowledge. They have also been champions in promoting the education of girls, as well as eradicating social malpractices, acting as a watchdog on alcoholism, domestic violence and child marriages. Tribal women have also made their presence visible in the field of legal services, academia and media.

Fifteen-year-old Sangeeta Bauri became a national hero and messenger of social change, by resisting child marriage in the tribal-populated rural villages of Purulia district in West Bengal. She went against her family, elders and even villagers, and refused to marry. She led a campaign against child marriage in villages, promoted girls' education in the region and became an inspiration for many. In December 2011, along with her friends Mukti Majhi and Bina Kalindi, Sangeeta was

officially congratulated by the President, Pratibha Devisingh Patil at the Rashtrapati Bhavan in New Delhi.

In the field of *POLITICS*, embracing change and challenges, tribal women have made advances in political representation, democratic rights, decision and policy-making. Although their representation has been marginal, a few women have made their way into Indian mainstream politics, such as Agatha K. Sangma (Garo) who became the first woman Parliamentarian from Mizoram. At the age of 29, she became the youngest M. P. [2008-2014] and Minister of State for Rural Development, and the face of Northeast India in politics. Mrs Urmila Singh, (69) comes from a family of freedom fighters from Raipur district of Chhattisgarh. In her 30-years of political career, she has served as the Governor of Himachal Pradesh [2010-2015], as Minister of State for Finance and Dairy Development [1993-95], as Minister for Social Welfare and Tribal Welfare Departments [1998-2003], and as Chairperson of the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes [2007-2010].²³

There are a few noted political leaders from Odisha, such as Frida Topno, 90, who started her political career in 1985 as Member of the State Legislative Assembly (MLA) has been a Parliamentarian in both the Upper House [1998-2002, Rajya Sabha] and Lower House [1991 and 1996 Lok Sabha].²⁴ Saraswati Hembram (66), as member of the Tribal Students' Association went on to become Sarpanch (Village council head) in 1975 and MLA for three terms from 1980-2000. Most probably she has been the first tribal woman to have obtained ministerial charge in the government of Odisha. Sushila Kumari Tiriya, (59) who started working as the Congress Youth leader in 1980, was elected to both the Upper House [1986 -1992 and 2006-2012] and Lower House (1991 and 1996). She served in various positions in the Ministry of Science and Technology, Atomic Energy and Ocean Development, Ministry of Civil Aviation, Ministry of Communications, Committee on the

Welfare of Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes, Ministry of Forest and Environment, Ministry of Food and Civil Supplies etc.²⁵ Shushila and Frida, both graduates, are deeply committed to political and social work and have chosen to remain single. Sarojini Hembram is the first woman MLA from Odisha to be elected to the Upper House [2014-2020]. She is the only tribal woman among the 108 MLAs of the Biju Janata Dal (BJD)-led government in Odisha. She quit a government job in 2009 to enter politics and work for the upliftment of tribal communities. Draupadi Murmu²⁶ is the first woman Governor of Jharkhand [in post since May 2015]. She started her political career as Vice President of Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) Scheduled Tribe wing of Odisha in 1997 and served as Minister of State in charge of Commerce and Transport [2000-2002] and Fisheries and Animal Resources Development [2002-2004] for Odisha state; she was also the National Executive Committee Member for the BJP. Hema Gamang and Bhagirathi Gamang are other few parliamentarians from Odisha.

Women from Jharkhand who have been successful in the field of politics are senior leader Sushila Kerketta. A post graduate in Philosophy she held several portfolios in Bihar government. She was minister of state for irrigation [independent charge from 1985-88 and was promoted to cabinet rank in 1989 and headed departments of mines, geology, food and civil supplies. She was also state president of Congress Party in the Bihar Assembly and Member of Parliament Lok Sabha [2004-2009]. Sumati Oraon was three times Lok Sabha member from 1982-1989 and has held various positions including Union Minister of State, Environment and Forests. Dr. Geetashree Oraon, former Cabinet Minister for Human Resource Development, Art, Culture, Sports & Youth Affairs, Dr. Louis Marandi, Cabinet Minister for Social Welfare, Women and Child Development, and a member of Jharkhand Women's Commission.

Other few women parliamentarians are Jaskaur Meena and

Usha Meena (Rajasthan); Jyoti Dhurvey, Chhabila Arvind Netam, Girja Kumari, Rajni Gandha, and Jamuna Devi (Madhya Pradesh); Dr. Prabha Kishore Tavidar (Gujarat); Kumari Kim Gangte (Manipur); Maharani Bibhu Kumari Devi (Tripura); Bonily Khongmen (Assam); Kamala Kumari Dumpa Mary Vijayakumari Karriydula, and B. Radhabai Ananda Rao from Andhra Pradesh.²⁷

Many tribal women have contributed greatly to **ART** and **LITERATURE**. Adivasi writers have also made forays into editing and publishing - their papers and magazines are being published in almost all major languages. In Jharkhand alone, some 146 magazines are being published in the Santali language. *The Aravali Udghosh*, published in Rajasthan, has already inspired two special issues of *Yuddhrat Aam Aadmi* on Adivasi writing. *Aravali Udghosh* is an important magazine that showcases most of the Hindi-speaking Adivasi writers. Among the many tribal women authors and critics are Dr. Rose Kerketta, Shanti Khalkho, Vandna Tete, Vasavi Kiro, Dayamani Barla, Bitiya Murmu, Nirmala Putul, Dr. Ivy Imogene Hansdak, Usha Kiran Attram, Shushila Dhurvey; Santali writers Parvati Murmu, Jasada Murmu, Lalibiti Murmu, Madhumita Hansda, Khuku Hansda and many others. There are also a number of young adivasi poets such as Jacinta Kerketta, Kavita Atram, Vishram Valvi, Vaharu Sonawane etc. Eminent writers from northeastern states include Padmashree Mamang Dai (journalist, author, poet from Arunachal Pradesh) Padmashree Dr. Temsula Ao (well-known author and ethnographer), Mona Zote (Mizo poet), Dr. Lalrinawmi Ralte, Dr. Gina Shangkhram etc. and many more.

Some of the noted **SPORTS** personalities are Jhanu Hansda, a top ranked international archer who won three gold medals in July 2015 at the World Police and Fire Games, Virginia, USA. In 2007, she bagged a bronze medal in the individual and a silver medal in a team event in the compound round of the Asian

Archery Championship in China; in 2005, she set a new world record in the women's 70m event (compound bow), logging 352 points at the National Ranking Archery Circuit Tournament in Delhi. In 2006, she created a new compound world record by shooting 1,405 points in Jamshedpur. In July 2015, as part of the national team, women archers from Jharkhand (Deepika Kumari, Laxmirani Manjhi, Rimil Biruili) qualified for the Rio Olympic Games in 2016 by winning at the World Championship in Copenhagen, Denmark. While Binita Soren scaled Mt. Everest at the age of 19 [May 2013], Purna Malavath became the world's youngest woman to climb Mt. Everest at the age of 13 [May 2014]. In July 2013, a photograph of a group of 18 teenage tribal girls clad in white and red border sarees, adorning their hair and wrists with plastic and paper flowers, lifting a bronze trophy in the prestigious Donosti Football Cup in Madrid, Spain, caught international media attention and went viral on social media. The girls (aged 12-14), who mostly came from villages in Jharkhand, bagged third place in Spain's biggest football tournament during their first international trip, competing against 36 other international teams.

M. C. Mary Kom (Manipur), and Laxmi Padiya (Jharkhand) have made history in the world of boxing. Mary Kom has been recipients of the *Arjuna*, the second highest sports awards bestowed by the Government of India. She is five-times World Amateur Boxing champion and the only woman boxer to have won a medal in each of the six World Championships. She is also the only Indian woman boxer to have qualified for the 2012 Summer Olympics where she won a bronze medal-women's boxing was incorporated into the Games for the first time that year. She became the first Indian woman boxer to win a Gold Medal in the Asian Games in 2014 in Incheon, South Korea. Born into a poor Kom tribal family in Manipur to agricultural labourer parents, Mary's life story is one of relentless struggle and unflinching passion for the sport of boxing. Her willpower

and aggression carried her through the minefield of politics in Indian sports. Her autobiography, *Unbreakable* [2013] and the biopic film *Mary Kom* [2014] are awe inspiring.

Endnotes:

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PART - I

FREEDOM FIGHTERS AND THE REVOLUTIONARY LEADERS

[1]

RANI GAIDINLIU [1915-1993]
(A Tribute on her Birth Centenary)



"Rani Gaidinliu dreamt of freedom for her people... what torment and suppression of spirit they (British) have brought to her, who in the prime of her youth dared to challenge an empire"

- Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru

India's history of freedom struggle saw the large-scale participation of women but, unfortunately, many of them are unknown to most Indians to this day. Rani Gaidinliu is one of them, even though she has been honoured with the Padma Bhushan, the third highest civilian award, and recognized in other ways by the Government of India. Gaidinliu was a visionary, spiritual leader, a reformer, and a guerrilla warrior. As a teenager, she spent 14 years in prison, making her one of India's longest incarcerated political prisoners.

Gaidinliu, a Rongmei Naga (also known as Kabui), was born to Lothuanang Pamei (father) and Kachuatlianliu (mother) on January 26, 1915 in Luangkau village in Tamenglong district of Manipur. She was the third child and second daughters of eight

children of the family. The literal meaning of Gaidinliu is a lady who promulgates good news. Her family belonged to the ruling clan of the village.

Gaidinliu did not have any formal education. She grew up under the Zeliangrong traditional system of *Luchu* (girls' dormitory) where girls were imparted with indigenous knowledge and skills such as music, dances, songs, weaving, art of hospitality etc.. In those days, knowledge of weaving was asked when selecting a bride and the weaving equipment was regarded as an essential item of a bride's wealth.¹ While most girls would help their mothers weave traditional garments, creative crafts and costumes, and with farming activities etc. Gaidinliu grew up with some extraordinary talents. She was intelligent and quick to learn and memorized new things and with such qualities won everyone around her.

None of her tribe members would have thought that a chubby little Rongmei girl would one day create the history of the Naga people; that one day she would spearhead Naga people to chase the British from their territory.

Around the age of 13, she felt that she had a special call from her deity to be of service to her people. At this juncture she came to know about her cousin Haipou Jadonang who was emerging as the leader of Zeliangrong people (combined Naga tribes: Zeme, Liangmai and Rongmei including Inpui).² After meeting him sometime in 1927, she began to associate with *Heraka*, a charismatic millenarian movement started by Jadonang and became his trusted disciple during the course of the movement. Seen as anti-establishment, both were subsequently arrested by the British – Jadonang was given the death penalty, while Gaidinliu was jailed for nearly two decades.³

A disciple of Haipou Jadonang

Haipou Jadonang was born in 1905 in Puiluan (Kambiron)

village of Tamenglong. He was said to have been blessed with divine power. From childhood he undertook many miraculous activities. As a boy he used to have trances continuously for days. By nature he was a very mild, soft spoken, kind, helpful and truthful boy. As he grew older, many people were drawn towards him due to his immense spirituality, great virtues, healing power and untiring devotion to the motherland and they regarded him as the child with divine power. He treated the sick, interpreted dreams and was a fortune teller. His interpretations and predictions were often accurate. He also dealt with village affairs.

It is said that *Kangrellung*, the God of the Bhuban or Bubuan Hills (*Bishnu* in Rongmei, *Munseniu* or *Mishnu* in Zemei) appeared to Jadonang in a dream and told him to become *maiba* (priest) and to build temples so that there would be prosperity and good health for everyone, although it was not in the custom of the Rongmei to build temples.⁴ Jadonang claimed miraculous powers and divine ordination through *Tingkao Ragwang*, the Kabui supreme being.⁵ He claimed to have experienced 'visions' and 'trances', which he said had allowed him to commune with *Tingkao Ragwang*, who 'took him to heaven' and showed him 'many of the secret things done by people before his time'⁶ and gave him instructions to liberate his people.

Jadonang was quite aware of the conservative, superstitious beliefs and practices that existed in the community. He introduced many reforms to the traditional religious practices and successfully introduced the worship of *Tingwang* or *Tingkao Ragwang*, as the only God. The worshipping consisted of facing east, putting one's hands together and praying. He constructed temples facing east as this signifies the direction of Bhuban/Bubuan Cave, as well as that of the sunrise.⁷

In order to protect indigenous culture and religion from the influence of Christianity, Jadonang introduced reformed

religious practices among his people. From distant hill and plains villages, large numbers of followers were drawn to him. Even though Christianity had already made its way into the Naga region through the establishment of schools and preaching centers, at the peak of Jadonang's popularity and influence, people considered him a God, a King, even a “*Messiah*”.

Haipou Jadonang was not only a religious leader but also a political and revolutionary leader who visualized a 'Gwandgi' or Kingdom for the Nagas. Jadonang and Gaidinliu were aware of the oppressive rule being meted out to the people of Tamenglong in particular and to the hill people of Manipur as a whole by the British. They were made to pay heavy house tax, which was equal to a year's wages of a family member, and forced to carry porter (*puat-thang*), without payment and had to subscribe money to feed the touring officials of the state when they went on tour in the hills.⁸ Even Gaidinliu once carried the luggage of a touring Sub Divisional Officer (SDO).⁹ Zeliangrong people were divided under three administrative units i.e. North Cachar Hills, Naga Hills (Assam) and Manipur for the administrative convenience of the British rulers. The imposition of British policy of 'Divide and Rule' was vehemently fought against by both Haipou Jadonang and Gaidinliu; they organized '*Riphen*' or soldiers and attempted to unite the Nagas into a common front to expel the British rulers and establish 'self-rule' called '*Makam Gwangdi*' (Naga Kingdom). They started collecting funds in cash or kind from the loyal villagers, training youth for warriors and purchasing arms and weapons.¹⁰ The youth were trained in armed struggle, promoted patriotic songs, warrior music and dance and martial arts. The arms were imported and other traditional weapons were also collected from villages. The numbers of '*Riphen*' grew to a capacity of 500.¹¹

Jadonang used to say, “The Meities have their own kings, the White man have a king, the Indians (*Tajuangmei*) also have

kings of their own, why should we not have our own king? The white men and we are all human beings, why should we be afraid of them? All human beings are equal”.¹²

The women's wing was trained by Gaidinliu. Their songs had political themes, secret code words or messages. Many village councils formed military alliances. However, British officials had already caught wind of Jadonang's activities fueling political agitation and started spying on him.

In March, 1930 an unfortunate incident happened. Four Meitei betel traders went to PUILUAN on a day of *genna* (Taboo) and violated the forbidden rule for outsiders to enter the village and they started cooking their food on fire. This act disgraced them and their religion vexed the villagers so much so that a mob led by Lurungpou of Mukti fell on the traders and killed them. Jadonang learnt about the incident, went to the village and severely punished the persons who were involved.¹³ Later Lurungpou was arrested by the police and the Manipur government was also alerted.

On 19 February 1931, Jadonang made his last pilgrimage to Bhuban or Bubuan Cave accompanied by Gaidinliu, with a contingent of soldiers and thousands of his followers. On their return, Jadonang was arrested in Lakhipur village by the Assam Rifles under section 108 of Indian Penal Code while Gaidinliu escaped into the hills. Jadonang was lodged in Imphal jail falsely accused of the murder of Manipuri traders. Despite appeals made to the Governor of Assam and the Governor General of India, the British had already planned to end his life and thus suppress his movement.

He was executed on the banks of the Nambul River, at the back of Imphal jail, on 29 August 1931. A large crowd of people witnessed the public hanging of Jadonang. They sobbed, wailed and paid their last tribute to their leader and martyr.

During the peak days of India's freedom struggle, when many fighters like Mangal Pandey, Khudiram Bose, Bhagat Singh etc. were creating history by laying down their lives, Jadonang in the far-off northeast thus sacrificed his life while protecting his people and territory when he was just 26.

After the execution of Jadonang, responsibility for the movement fell on Gaidinliu's shoulders. She became leader of the guerrilla forces at the age of 17. She concentrated her rebellion in the Trans-Barak-Basin situated in the present Tamenglong district of Manipur, Southern Nagaland and the North Cachar Hills of Assam. Their main objectives were to restore past glory by driving out the British; to protect their people and territory; to preserve the indigenous belief system, culture and custom; to end inter-village and inter-tribal disputes and unite the Zeliangrong tribes.

She also worked for the revival of the new cult introduced by Jadonang, which later came to be known as *Heraka*, meaning to build a fence (*ka*) to keep the smaller deities or gods (*Hera*) away. Gaidinliu was a good composer and singer. She composed several religious hymns and patriotic songs, many of which are still sung today on various occasions: festivals, marriage celebrations or death rituals for example.

Gaidinliu combined the *Heraka* religious reform with a political ambition to form a Zeliangrong territory. She mobilized, directed, organized and collected funds from her people to launch the movement. She explained about the independent Naga kingdom and urged people to fight the British. The purpose was to emphasize the need for a collective front with the objective of achieving the "economic, social, educational and political advancement of the Zeliangrong people".

The Zeliangrong Rebellion (1931-33)

Gaidinliu declared, "We, the Nagas were and are free people,

the white, the British have no right to rule over us, so we should not recognize their sovereignty over us and will not pay house tax to the British Government and unjust laws like forced labour and compulsory porter subscription."¹⁴

Gradually, the political and religious movement promoted by Gaidinliu became successful and gained momentum, and this became a great challenge to the British rulers. In a note recorded in June 1932, J. P. Mills, Deputy Commissioner, Naga Hills, stated that, "The real danger of the movement is the spirit of defiance. Unless Gaidinliu and her party are captured, there is a grave danger of serious outbreak".¹⁵

Both Manipur and British governments spent almost a year attempting to capture Gaidinliu. In order to influence the people, they spread rumors about her being a sorceress and witch who sacrificed humans to please the Goddess, and drank their blood etc. Temples were destroyed in an attempt to halt the movement. The government declared that Gaidinliu would be forgiven for all her crimes if she renounced the movement.

From her hideouts, Gaidinliu was fully aware of the government's conspiracy. The British authorities had launched a manhunt for her. She escaped arrest, however, by moving around the villages.

When people refused (on Gaidinliu's instructions) to carry the touring British Army's luggage such as rations, artillery and ammunition the British imposed fines on the people and even on entire villages. On non-payment of fines, they started looting their houses and belongings.

The Hungrum encounter

Worried by the growing influence of Gaidinliu, the Deputy Commissioner of Naga Hills ordered and sent a large troop of soldiers to arrest her. In 1932, Gaidinliu's army attacked the

Assam Rifles patrols in North Cachar Hills. She also attacked them at the Zemi village of Hungrum, in which six Assam Rifles soldiers were killed and eight Zeme warriors were shot dead. Bopungwami village in the Naga Hills was burnt down.¹⁶ Mr. Harvey, the President of Manipur State *Darbar* (court) offered an attractive reward of Rs. 200/-, later raised to Rs. 500/, and exemption of house tax for ten years for anybody or any village giving information leading to her arrest.¹⁷ Still nobody came forward to inform on her.

Arrest of Gaidinliu

In October 1932, Gaidinliu moved to Polumi village and started the construction of a wooden fortress which could accommodate more than four thousands warriors. She knew that the coming days would be crucial and that either she or the British would win. Large reinforcements of the Assam Rifles made a surprise attack on the village during which Gaidinliu and her forces were captured at pre-dawn. Most of her forces were either executed or imprisoned. She and her younger brother were arrested but Gaidinliu was put to trial in the murder case of Manipuri traders. She was convicted for the abetment of murder and sent to life imprisonment. She spent 14 years in different jails, one year in Guwahati, six years in Shillong, three years in Aizawl and four years in Tura jail.

In 1937, during his tour to Assam, Congress President Jawaharlal Nehru came to hear about the movement of Jadonang and Gaidinliu's imprisonment. He met Gaidinliu at Shillong jail and, moved by her bravery, he promised to pursue her release. In an article published in the *Hindustan Times*, Nehru described her as a 'Rani' or Queen of the Nagas. He said, *"I heard a story which India ought to know and cherish... She dreamt of freedom for her people... what torment and suppression of spirit they have brought to her, who in the prime of her youth dared to challenge an empire"*¹⁸

Nehru also wrote to the British authorities requesting the release of Rani Gaidinliu but the Secretary of State for India rejected the request stating that trouble could arise again if she was released. In September 1945, when Rani Gaidinliu was released from Tura jail, thousands of her followers came to receive her outside the jail. However, she was not allowed to enter Manipur (from where she belonged) and was secretly interned in faraway Yimrap village in Tuensang district of Nagaland. She was forced to live under certain rules and movement restrictions. She was kept away from all political activities.

Gaidinliu's life in Free India

When Rani Gaidinliu was released from Tura jail, thousands of her followers came to receive her outside the jail. However, she was not allowed to enter Manipur. She therefore, chose a remote village in Nagaland as her residence. The Government of India arranged a freedom fighter's pension, a residence, security guards and other facilities. She was kept away from all political activities.

In 1952, she met the first President of India, Rajendra Prasad during his maiden visit to Manipur. The restrictions imposed on her free movements were later lifted and she was allowed to visit her people in Imphal, Manipur and her birth place, Luangkau. Thereafter, she became engaged in social work.

But since 1950s Naga troubles again started, with occasional conflicts between Gaidinliu's associates and the Naga National Council (NNC), who advocated secession from India. Many Zeliangrong people were divided between these two organizations, which had different demands and objectives. Gaidinliu's followers continued their demand for a separate Zeliangrong Administrative Unit or homeland within the Union of Independent India. The NNC, under the leadership of A. Z. Phizo, started a rebellion in 1956.

With the growing threats to her life, Gaidinliu once again went underground and organized a private army of about 1,000 men equipped with 400-500 rifles (collected from the British and Japanese after World War II). They also received weapons from neighbouring countries. She operated her activities from underground for nearly three years.

After much persuasion by the government of Nagaland and Manipur for negotiations, Gaidinliu allowed the Nagaland government officials to meet her in a secret place. Rani put the first question to Additional Deputy Commissioner Mr. Dev and his colleagues,

“Were you not afraid to come to this unknown place among strangers?”

Mr. Dev replied, “Why would a son be afraid when approaching his mother?”

Rani said, “You have called me your mother, so always keep my faith. Only with difficulty do I trust anybody. But I have a firm faith in you. I believe you will not deceive me.”¹⁹

Like other revolutionaries of the freedom struggle, Rani wanted to drive the British out of her region. She explained to the officials that, in the interests of her people, she wanted a district of Jaliangrong for their socio-economic improvement. After much debate and exchange of opinions for three long days, Gaidinliu agreed to surrender on one condition, that a meeting be arranged with the Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, in Delhi. Mr. Dev accepted the agreement in writing.

At the arrangement of the Nagaland government, on 22 February 1966, Rani Gaidinliu went to New Delhi with Zeliangrong leaders and submitted a memorandum to Indira Gandhi demanding a separate 'Zeliangrong Administrative Unit' under the Union of India. To press for this demand, Gaidinliu

led the Zeliangrong People's Convention (ZPC) and continued to lobby the Government of India until her demise on 17 February 1993.

Gaidinliu was very close to Nehru and Indira Gandhi. However, before the government could make any concrete efforts to fulfill the aspirations of the Zeliangrong people, Indira Gandhi died in 1984 and all political activities came to halt with the outbreak of the Kuki-Naga (ethnic) conflict in 1992. This caused political unrest in the region, uprooting hundreds of villages and claiming many lives.

Upon the demise of Rani Gaidinliu, then Prime Minister P. V. Narashimha Rao sent a message of condolence referring to her as “one of the most primeval freedom fighters of Northeast India”. The Governor of Manipur, Sh. Chintamani Panigrahi, many public leaders, thousands of her followers and admirers from all parts of the Northeast attended Gaidinliu's funeral ceremony in her native village. A full day's holiday was declared by the Government of Manipur, and R. K. Dorendra Singh, Chief Minister of Manipur at the time, later attended the Condolence Service at Imphal.

Awards and recognitions conferred on Gaidinliu:

The Government of India recognized Rani Gaidinliu's service to society and conferred on her a number of awards and honours as follows:

1. *The Tamra Patra*, the freedom fighter award (1972) by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.
2. *The Padma Bhushan* (1981) by President Neelam Sanjiva Reddy.
3. *The Vivekananda Sewa Summan* (1983) by Bada Bazar Kumarsabha Pustakalaya, Kolkata.
4. *Gold Medal and Award* on behalf of the Catholic Church, Nagaland (1992) in recognition of her work to promote communal harmony among different tribes.

5. *Rani Gaidinliu Zeliang Stri Shakti Puraskar* (Women's Power Award) was instituted in 1991 by the Government of India. The award is given by the President of India every year on 8th March (International Women's Day) to individual women for their exceptional achievements, and carries a cash prize of Rs.3 Lakh and a citation.
6. *The Birsa Munda Award* (1996) (Posthumous) by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India for services dedicated to the cause of tribals and the down trodden.
7. The Government of India released a One Rupee Postage Stamp of Rani Gaidinliu in 1996.
8. Paying tribute to Gaidinliu, the Indian Coast Guard launched a *Naval Vessel christened 'Rani Gaidinliu'* at Vishakapatnam Shipyard on 6 November 2010.
9. *The massive Dharmasala Guest House (Rani Gaidinliu Bhavan) in Mumbai (2000)*.
10. The currency note of Rs. 100 and coin of Rs. 5 are issued in her name (2015).

Rani Gaidinliu lived an extraordinary life. She spent her youth in anguish behind bars. Independence came to her country but peace never visited her land. Her goodwill and sacrifice should not go in vain. No human race is superior; no religious faith is inferior. When this year marks the centenary of Gaidinliu's birth (26 January 1915 –26 January 2015), her courage, righteous thoughts and deeds should truly inspire us to contribute towards building a peaceful civil society and nation. Let every celebration of the anniversary of Gaidinliu's birth be cherished with a reaffirmation of and commitment to peaceful coexistence among the people of Northeast India and the world.

Endnotes:

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Gaidinliu with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi



With Jawaharlal Nehru at Shillong Jail, 1937



After surrender



Healing a young girl through her spiritual healing



Gaidinliu with Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi accompanied Zeliangrong Peoples' Convention leaders



Meeting her associates



Postal Stamp

[This story is based on a literature review]

[2]

**HELEN LEPCHA AKA SAVITRI DEVI
[1902-1980]**



Helen Lepcha, aka Savitri Devi, was one of the most famous freedom fighters from the hill region of Darjeeling and Sikkim. She was born to Mr. and Mrs. Achung Lepcha on 14 January 1902, in the small village Sangmu, about 15 km from Namchi, the capital of South Sikkim. Although she was born in Sikkim, she spent most of her life in Darjeeling, West Bengal. Sikkim has named her a “daughter of the soil” and she is fondly remembered by the people of her homeland.

In the early 19th century, Darjeeling and Kurseong began to develop once the British had built roads to these hill stations, making them the summer residence for their military and civil

officers and families. With the rapid development in infrastructure, communication, educational institutions and employment opportunities in tea plantations, Helen's family moved to Kurseong. She received her primary education from Scott Mission School in Kurseong. However, she dropped out of school in 1916.

By then, the Non-Cooperation Movement had spread throughout the tea estates of Darjeeling. Various socio-economic problems of the plantation workers had not been addressed by the British, resulting in their participation in the protests. In addition, the opening of the Congress Party's office in Darjeeling led to a great deal of enthusiasm among the hill people. Drove of people joined the Congress Party, under the leadership of Dal Bahadur Giri, an ardent follower of Gandhiji. Among the first to join were Bhagatbir Lama, Helen Lepcha, Putali Devi and Jungbir Sapkota.¹

The message of the *Swadeshi* Movement, with its pledge to boycott foreign goods and the use of *charkha* and *khadi* (spinning wheel and hand woven cloth), had already reached the region. A group of Bengali gentlemen arrived from Calcutta to propagate the spinning of *charkha* and *khadi*. Helen listened to their impressive speeches and decided to follow the principles of Gandhiji throughout her life. She went to Calcutta, where her elder sister was living, and most likely reached a turning point in her life. She was admitted to a *charkha* training center which was run by the grand daughter of Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar—a great scholar, reformer and philosopher. Soon, Helen proved her efficiency in the art of spinning the *charkha*. Her capacity and talent led to her being selected as one of the principal members to head an exhibition in Muzaffarpur, Bihar.²

The protests against the partition of Bengal and the *Swadeshi*

movement attracted many women throughout India. During this time, Helen came under the influence of many prominent women leaders such as Madam Bhikaji Cama, Kasuturba Gandhi, Kamala Nehru, Sarala Devi, Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant and Aruna Asaf Ali.

In the mid-1920s, Helen toured the famine-struck areas and selflessly helped Bihar flood victims with all her physical and moral strength. During this time, she met Gandhiji at the house of Safi Dand, a Congress volunteer. It was there that Gandhi likely invited her to the Sabarmati Ashram in Gujarat. Gandhiji changed her name to Savitri Devi as Helen sounded non-Indian.³

Savitri Devi became an ardent follower of Gandhiji. She was actively involved in the activities of the Congress Labour Union in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, particularly at the Jharia coal fields, Dhanbad, Banikpur, Danapur, Patna and Muzaffarpur. In 1921, she led a procession of about 10,000 mine workers from the Jharia coal field against labour exploitation and the replacement of local (mostly) tribal workers. Her growing popularity among the rural people of Bengal and Bihar did not go unnoticed and a warrant was issued against her.⁴ In order to escape arrest, Savitri traveled around. For some time she lived at Ananda Bhavan (now known as Swaraj Bhawan), Allahabad, the residence of Nehru. During her stay there she worked closely with the Nehru family and she also routinely met many of the local Congress leaders. At that time, she recalls, Indira Gandhi was just a small girl.⁵ She then went back to Kurseong and worked with the Congress committee.

After the Nagpur Session of the Indian National Congress in December 1920, people were asked to renounce government titles, schools and foreign goods, and to refuse to pay their taxes.⁶ At the Vijayawada Congress Session in 1921, it was

decided to introduce 2 million *charkhas* (spinning wheels) into Indian households and make *khadi* an integral part of achieving *Swaraj* or self-rule. Many women leaders like Sarala Devi promoted *khadi* in Punjab; Maniben Patel, daughter of Sardar Ballabhbhai Patel organized women in Gujarat; and Basanti Devi and Urmila Das, the wife and daughter of Chitaranjan Das (founder of the Swaraj Party in Bengal) sold *khadi* in the streets of Calcutta and all were arrested by the police. This only strengthened the movement, however, and the number of women who volunteered within it increased by leaps and bounds.

A great number of Gorkhas (generally referring to the Nepalese, and other ethnic communities bordering Nepal and the Northeast India) joined the movement. Savitri Devi went from house to house to promote the boycotting of foreign goods in Kurseong and Siliguri. She led protests in many places and burnt foreign goods. A curfew was declared in the area but they continued the demonstrations. Savitri Devi and 12 others were arrested by the police and put behind bars for three months in Darjeeling jail. Next day the *Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, one of the largest circulation Bengali newspapers, reported that Savitri Devi and many Congress volunteers had been arrested.⁷ After her release, she was kept under strict vigilance and for three years she was unable to move out of Kurseong town.⁸ People from the region looked up to her as their leader and popularly called her Helen *didi* (sister).

In 1925, when Gandhiji came to visit the ailing Chitaranjan Das (founder of the Swaraj Party in Bengal) in Darjeeling, he paid homage to the martyrs. Savitri Devi went to see him. Seeing Savitri wearing traditional ornaments, Gandhiji ordered her to take it off as it did not suit a freedom fighter.

In 1939, Subhash Chandra Bose was transferred to Darjeeling

Hills from Poona where he was in prison and in poor health. The British Government put him under house arrest at his elder brother, Sarat Chandra's house at Kurseong. Among the few concessions that he received, Bose could see local visitors and national leaders from the region, including Savitri Devi, Putali Devi, Jungbir Sapkota, Gaga Tshering and Pratiman Singh Lama.

The Directory of *Indian Women Today* (1976) records that Savitri Devi helped Subhas Chandra Bose escape imprisonment in Kurseong and migrate to Germany through Kabul.⁹ When Subhas Chandra Bose was kept under house arrest at Giddapahar, Savitri Devi communicated with him through letters hidden inside the bread sent from her husband Ishan Ahmed's bakery. It is believed that Subhas Bose wanted to escape to Kabul and Savitri Devi arranged his disguise. Manor Husain, the police authority of Kurseong Thana and Khargabahadur Bist, helped Bose to move from Kurseong to Calcutta and from there to Germany via Kabul.¹⁰ It is not known whether Subhash Bose ever divulged his intentions or not, but when he did suddenly disappear, a number of nationalist leaders from the region were arrested on suspicion of helping him escape. The nationalist leaders were later released due to lack of evidence.¹¹

In 1936, Savitri Devi was elected the first woman Commissioner of Kurseong Municipality. After independence, she continued her social work helping poor and orphaned children at her own house. At a felicitation ceremony in 1958, the Tribal Welfare Department, Government of West Bengal recognized her contribution in the Freedom Movement. In 1972, she was awarded the '*Tamrapatra*', freedom fighter award by the Government of India. She was also made Chairperson of the Freedom Fighter Award Committee (advisory body constituted by the Government of India) of Darjeeling district, the other

members being Gaga Tshering of Bhutia Busty and Shew Mangal Pandey of Siliguri. Both these gentlemen had profound respect for Helen. Had she been more ambitious, she could have secured a good position in political or public life but, like a typical Lepcha, she chose to lead a simple Gandhian life, away from politics and power¹² until she drew her last breath on 18 August 1980.

Endnotes:

1. Barun Roy, *Gorkhas and Gorkhaland*, Parboti Roy Foundation, Darjeeling, 2012, p. 295
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12. D. T. Tamlong, *Some Lepcha Heroes*. Mayel Lyang & the Lepchas, July 2010. Available at <http://aachulay.blogspot.in/2010/07/mayel-lyang-lepchas-about-sikkim-and.html>

[This story is based on a literature review]



[3]

PUTALIMAYA TAMANG [1920-1984]

Another patriot of the Darjeeling Hills, Putalimaya Tamang aka Putali Devi (Poddar) was born on 14 February 1920 in Kurseong. Her father, Madan Bahadur Tamang, was a *chaukidar* (watchman) in the village and Putali Devi was the oldest of four siblings. She also studied at Scott Mission School, Kurseong.

In 1934, a youth Congress leader, Saryu Prasad Poddar, came to Kurseong from Bihar to mobilize the youth and create a spirit of nationalism among them. Putalimaya, Harish Chettri and others were inspired by him and joined the Congress. As Putalimaya was too young to join the party, Saryu Prasad advised her to continue her schooling. Even at school, however, she was always keen on meeting Congress workers and garnering information on party activities. Finally, when a branch of the Congress Committee was established at Kurseong in 1936, Putalimaya saw a chance to become a member. Other local leaders such as Pratiman Singh Lama, Harish Chettri and Savitri Devi were already involved with the Congress. Putalimaya actively participated in party activities but her father was not happy with her involvement as he had been warned by British officials to keep her away. She was even offered a job at a local hospital as a nurse but refused to



Sikkim Chaper of Bharatiya Gorkha Parisangh visited and discovered the ancestral home of Savitri Devi (Pic. 1), in 2010; met her family members at the Chorten built in her honour (Pic. 2), the old pear tree in Helen Lepcha's remembrance (Pic 3). Photo credit: <https://himalnews.wordpress.com>

accept it.

In 1913, Putalimaya started a society for socially and economically disadvantaged people in Kurseong, Darjeeling, called Harijan Samaj, where she educated people about the ill effects of alcoholism and taught them to read and write at night school. However, her primary objectives were to ingrain patriotism into the youth and women, to create awareness of the ongoing freedom struggle, to impart knowledge and train women in *charkha* (spinning wheels) to make *khadi* (hand woven cloth). In 1939, she formed *Nari Kalyan Samiti*, a women's association, with the aim of addressing all kinds of socio-economic issues faced by women, and to impart a knowledge and training of *charkha*. Slowly, a large number of people began to associate with her, and both the Harijan Samaj and the Nari Kalyan Samiti became very strong among the common people.¹ The women openly started promoting the nationalist movement, keeping photographs of Gandhiji. In addition, throughout the entire hill region of Kurseong, Darjeeling and Kalimpong, the Congress *Samiti* (Committee) began to hold a strong position.² These activities caught the attention of British officials and she was warned to keep away from the movement.

On 12 August 1942, Saryu Prasad was arrested by the police and, the very next day, Putalimaya led a huge protest where she too was arrested by the police, along with other youth leaders. Putalimaya was imprisoned for one and a half years. While in jail she went on hunger strike, demanding that she be treated as a political prisoner and not as any other criminal.³

In January 1944, she was released from jail due to her deteriorating health. Saryu Prasad Poddar was also released that same year. Her parents were very upset and gave her an ultimatum. They told her she had to choose between her family and the movement. Determined, Putalimaya chose the

movement. When the local Congress Committee realized this, they suggested that the equally determined Saryu Prasad be wedded to Putalimaya.

The wedding garnered its fair share of controversy. Many locals protested at this inter-caste marriage, which they believed was against their customs and traditions. A large number of people surrounded the Gorkha Janak Pustalaya (library) with *Khukuris* (traditional dagger-like weapons) in an attempt to stop the marriage ceremony.⁴ Putalimaya Devi's parents were against the marriage and did not support the newlyweds. Once married, they faced economic problems due to lack of income. There were even days when they went without food and yet continued their activities on behalf of the freedom movement.⁵

After India's independence, Putalimaya continued her social work for the cause of the women who toiled in the tea estates. In 1975, she received the '*Tamrapatra*' award and the '*Swatantrata Senani Pension*' (freedom fighter's pension) until her death.⁷ She was well respected among the people, who called her *Mataji* or mother. She worked as the President of the Mahukuma Congress Committee of Kurseong and as the Vice President of the Darjeeling District Committee. She died on 1 December 1984, at Siliguri hospital, after a prolonged illness.

Coming from tiny villages in Darjeeling, Helen and Putalimaya are just two of the many women leaders who devoted their lives to ensuring a free India; they inspired the people of the hills and the plains and set an example for the coming generations.

Endnotes:

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3. M. P.Rai, *Veer Jatiko Amar Kahani*, Aajako Sikkim Prakashan, Gangtok, 1992, p. 124-125 (Nepali)
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5. Ibid.
6. Ibid. p. 59
7. Suryamani Sharma (Ed.), *Hamra Swantantrata Senani*, Sumeru Publication, Siliguri, 1990, p. 76 (Nepali)

[This story is based on a literature review]

[4]

DASHRIBEN CHAUDHARI [1918-2003] Gandhi's Foot Soldier



"Whether we live or die, until the time we do not get Swaraj, I will spin and wear khadi"

- Dashriben to the British Magistrate during trial.

One of the youngest foot soldiers of the freedom struggle, Dashriben Chaudhari joined the movement at the tender age of eight. She went on to have a long association with Mahatma Gandhi and his wife Kasturba and lived the Gandhian way of life. Popularly known as Dashriba or Dashriben, she is widely credited for having taught an illiterate Kasturba Gandhi how to read and write while imprisoned at the Yerwada jail in Puna, Maharashtra.

Dashriben was born on 3 October 1918 into a Chaudhari adivasi family in Vedcchi village, now located in the Tapi district of Gujarat. She had her first *darshan*¹ (to see with reverence) of Gandhi when she was six years old. Inspired by Gandhi's *Swadeshi*² philosophy, she started wearing *khadi* hand-spun clothes from her early childhood.

Dashriben grew up to be a prominent Gandhian adivasi leader in the region. She came from a family that had a history of leadership in tribal community struggles. Her maternal grandfather, Jeevanbhai Chaudhari, was the first to organize the tribal communities in western India against the British oppression.

Tribal mobilization in South Gujarat

The plains of the Surat and Valsad districts were penetrated by both Hindus and Muslims as long ago as the 16th century. When the Peshwas³ (ministers under Maratha rule) entered Gujarat, they first established their seat at Songadh in Surat in 1719. After the 18th century, when the forest tracts of the plains were cleared and cultivable land was made available, the non-tribal population gradually increased in these regions. With this, the grabbing of the tribals' cultivable land by non-tribals began in full swing, so much so that these migrants, who were in a minority in this region, came to own most of the cultivable land. In a very short time, the migrants, comprising Anavil, Brahimans, Kanbi Patiadars and Parsis, became landlords and the tribals were reduced to a subservient status.⁴ Many of them thus lost their lands.

The adivasis tapped their own trees for *toddy* (naturally alcoholic sap of certain types of palm trees) and distilled liquor for themselves. At the beginning of twentieth century, however, the British administration introduced a prohibition on the production of liquor in the Gujarat area. Everyone except the government was prohibited from producing liquor and *toddy*. Anyone who did was punished.⁵ The adivasis lost the right to prepare their own liquor and *toddy* but could not rid themselves of their habit of drinking. This resulted in growing indebtedness and loss of land. Slowly, they sank into dire poverty and starvation. They became either tenants or labourers. The worse plight was that of the *Dublas*⁶ or the

*Halpati*⁷ who, having lost their lands, were compelled to work as bonded labourers for oppressive landlords. Prior to that, the great *Chhapania* famine of the 1890s had a deep impact on the tribals.⁸ The famine resulted in epidemics and death, which led to a severe decline in the population and animal stock, and an acute food shortage. To add to their misery, the British refused to reduce the taxes of the adivasi farmers and so they had to borrow money from moneylenders who then later seized their land.

Most of these tribes were largely traditional agriculturists, except the Dublas who were typically farm servants to the Hindu land owning class. Meanwhile, the emergence of socio-religious movements like the Bhajan Mandalis, Bhakti Movement, Devi Movement etc. attracted many tribal communities in South Gujarat. The Devi movement urged the people to stop drinking liquor and *toddy*. While these attempts were being made, the landlords, supported by the British administration and the Gaikward regime (ruled by the Gaikward dynasty), worked hard to suppress any social reforms. The non-tribals did not want tribals to be aware of their problems (such as illiteracy, loss of land, alcoholism, bonded labour etc.) and the government too wanted to generate revenues through the sale of liquor to the tribals. It is said that two or three people used to hold an adivasi down and forcibly pour liquor down their throat.⁹

The socio-religious movement became a unique feature of the early social mobilization in the region, and also produced many adivasi reformers and leaders. A few tribal groups who were educated, like the Dhodias, Gamits and Choudharis, started raising awareness, pointing out the root cause of their misery – their liquor habit. The effects of the reforms began to be felt, alarming both the landlords and the government. The adivasis realized the exploitative nature of colonial policies such as the Indian Forest Act (1884) and the Land Acquisition Act (1894), which resulted in the loss of their rights to their lands and

forests. In 1903, along with leaders such as Jeevanbhai Chaudhari, the adivasis founded the *Kali Paraj Parishad* or Black People's or Forest People's Conference in Vedchhi to formulate campaigns for their rights.

The Kali Paraj Parishad invited Gandhi to its Sheikhpura Conference in Gujarat to raise awareness and mobilize the tribal society to oust the British. Gandhi was the first non-tribal leader to be trusted by the tribals. However, he couldn't come but sent his wife Kasturba, on his behalf. In 1922, a *Swaraj Ashram*¹⁰ was established in Bardoli. Jeevanbhai and other adivasi leaders went to the *ashram* and asked to arrange Gandhi's visit to Vedchhi. In 1924, Gandhi himself came to the Parishad in Vedchhi village. Dashriben was then just six years old. A *Swaraj ashram* was established in Vedchhi, too, and very soon hundreds of villagers started spinning and wearing *khadi*.

Meeting Gandhi and Vallabh Patel

In 1926, Gandhi visited Vedchhi again. Dashriben was the youngest of those who came to welcome Gandhi so he came to her. She wanted to garland Gandhi but could not reach him. To her surprise, Gandhi lifted her up so that she could put the garland around him. Gandhi looked at the jewelry she was wearing and asked,

“What are these?”

She said, “This is my jewelry. My *mama* (uncle) had them made for me.”

Gandhi said, “I see. But *beta* (child), we must live the life of a *sadhu* (saint). Will you take these off?”

“Yes, *Bapuji* (father in Gujarati), I will take these off.”

Immediately, she asked her father to take them off.¹¹ From that moment on, Dashriben never wore any ornamentation, except

her own hand woven white *khadi saree*.¹²

By this time, Dashriben had attended school and studied as far as class three. She was lucky enough to study because her grandfather, Jeevanbhai Chaudhari, was a teacher. Her other maternal uncles were also educated; one worked as the *Naik Mamlatdar* (assistant executive officer in the *Taluka*, an administrative district for taxation purposes) and another as a teacher. Soon she realized that education was the only way to redeem millions from their poverty and attain *Swaraj* (self-rule or self-governance).

In 1928, Vallabh Patel, (one of the leaders of the Congress and founding fathers of the Republic of India) came to Bardoli and started a *Satyagraha*¹³ (non-violent resistance) for the non-payment of taxes to the British and to protest against their unjust policies. The Bardoli *Satyagraha* was a major episode of civil disobedience and revolt in the independence movement, led by Patel. Knowing that Dashriben could read, write and sing well, Patel encouraged her to go with the group to villages to spread the message of *Satyagraha* through song. While others only knew the adivasi dialect, Dashriben was well-educated and knew Gujarati as well. She actively participated in many meetings and continued her schooling in the village.

In 1929, she and her friends picketed liquor shops. They also regularly destroyed all the fruits on trees that were used for liquor making. She was in class four by this time.

Meeting Kasturba Gandhi

Later, Dashriben went to the *Kanyashala* (girl's school) at Valod. One day, her uncle came and said that Gandhiji was not in favor of a state education and preferred national education. She was therefore pulled out of the *Kanyashala* in 1929 and sent to the national school at Puna, set up by Gandhiji and where Dashriben's uncle was a teacher.

There she met Kasturba Gandhi, who taught hygiene, cooking and prayer in the school. One day, a letter arrived at the school for Kasturba from Gandhi. As Kasturba did not know how to read or write, she asked a teacher to read the letter. In it, Gandhi informed her of his intention to launch a *Satyagraha* to force the British to repeal the salt tax law. He asked Kasturba to join him. He also wanted other girls from the school to join them, and to go from village to village and spread the message.

Dashriben immediately decided to join the *Satyagraha*. Even though she had seen police atrocities against protesters, she was not scared. As a group they, started going to villages. Her father joined Gandhi at Dandi March or the Salt *Satyagraha*.

The Dandi March began with a prayer meeting at Sabarmati on 11 March 1930, where Gandhi said, "I will return here only after winning *Swaraj*. If I fail, this should be regarded as my last prayer on *ashram* grounds."¹⁴ On 12 March 1930, Gandhi and his followers set out on foot from Sabarmati Ashram¹⁵ to Dandi (near Surat). Thousands of adivasis and harijans¹⁶ joined the march. The 241-mile-stretch to Dandi was completed on 5 April. The following morning, Gandhi bathed in the sea and, after a prayer, he bent down to pick up a lump of salty mud and declared, "With this, I am shaking the foundations of the British Empire."¹⁷ He then boiled it in seawater, illegally producing the controversial commodity.¹⁸

In reaction, the British Government mercilessly beat people and jailed them. Dashriben's family and other protesting farmers had to bear tremendous repression and were jailed frequently. Her father was jailed for nine months in 1932. Gandhi and Kasturba were also arrested and put in Yerawada jail. The *Satyagraha* (Civil Disobedience Movement) continued for two years and, by the end of the year, over 60,000 people were said to have been jailed.¹⁹

In 1933, when her father was released from jail, Dashriben and her friends went to Surat with six other women to picket a shop that sold clothes made in Manchester, England. The police caught them and brought them before the magistrate.

The magistrate asked Dashriben, "What is your name?"

She replied, "Dashriben Rumsibai."

"Where do you live?", "India", "Where do you work?", "India," she said.

"What will you do now?"

"Get *Swaraj*."

The magistrate then said, "This girl is very dangerous. She hasn't given even a single straight reply!"

He continued, "What is your age?" She said, "How do I know? We are adivasis. We don't know how to read or write."

"Do you promise not to spin and wear *khadi* and promise not to utter Gandhi's name?" the magistrate asked.

"I will do all this. We have come here to take *Swaraj*. Whether we live or die, until the time we do not get *Swaraj*, we will do exactly this," she replied defiantly.²⁰

Dashriben and her colleagues were jailed for one year, first in Sabarmati jail and later in Yerawada jail in Poona, where Gandhi, Kasturben and thousands of others were also imprisoned. After hearing that women from Gujarat had arrived, Kasturba came to meet them. Dashriben fell at her feet and reminded Kasturba that she had met her at the Poona school.

Kasturba didnot know how to read and write but she was always at the forefront of different movements. Occasionally,

she took Gandhi's role in his absence. During the Bardoli *Saytagraha*, while addressing the press and issuing statements, she confessed that she was illiterate.

One day in jail, Kasturba asked Dashriben to teach her. Dashri had studied only to the 5th grade, yet she started teaching Kasturba the alphabet. As Gandhi was also imprisoned in the same jail, Kasturba had to communicate with him through letters. Previously, Kasturba used to ask other women to write to Gandhi on her behalf. Now Dashriben taught her how to write. First she wrote on a slate, which Kasturba copied onto her letter. Slowly she started writing draft letters, which Dashri corrected before sending on to Gandhi. When Gandhi received her letter he was astonished. In his reply, he congratulated Dashriben on being able to teach Kasturba within a few days in jail what he had failed to do throughout the whole of their stay in Africa.²¹

After they were released, Dashriben continued her studies in Sabarmati Ashram, where she met many other leaders, including Indira Gandhi. She continued to be a part of the movement.

On 21 August 1942, when the Quit India Movement was announced in Bardoli, holding the tri-colour Indian national flag aloft, Dashriben led 5,000 people to plant it in front of the police station. They were arrested before they could reach the station, and Dashriben was sent back to Yerawada jail in 1942.

After being released in 1944, she married Kanjibhai Chaudhari, also a freedom fighter. During the same year, on 22 February, Kasturba died of a chronic illness in the Aga Khan Palace, Pune, leaving a deep impact on Dashriben. After completing her high school, Dashriben took up teaching, along with Kanjibhai. She taught thousands of adivasi children and youth.

After retiring in 1976, she once again became active in the

social movement, as the President of Gujarat Khadi Gram Udyog, an organization which promoted handwoven *khadi*/cotton garments and other items. Her husband passed away in 1998. Thereafter, Dashriben became an active member of the Adivasi Ekta Parishad, an Adivasi Council, until her last breath in Vedchhi on 2 September 2013, at 95.

Her son, Dr. Ashokbhai Chaudhari, continues the legacy of his parents and forefathers, through the Adivasi Ekta Parishad. Its network is spread across the states of Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. The council claims to have reached 2,500,000 people and works towards creating a peaceful world by promoting tribal social culture, unity, self-determination, justice and equality.

Endnotes:

1. Darsan or Darsana is a Sanskrit term which means to see with reverence or devotion.
2. Swadeshi, or principles of home economy, was promoted by Gandhiji during the freedom struggle. It means 'self-sufficiency' or 'self-governance'. Gandhi's vision of a free India was not a nation-state but a confederation of self-governing, self-reliant, self-employed people living in village communities, deriving their livelihood from the product of their homesteads. Maximum economic and political power - including the power to decide what could be imported into or exported from the village - would remain in the hands of the village assemblies. The Swadeshi movement had begun as an economic strategy to remove the British colonizers from power by following the principles of Swadeshi. Gandhi encouraged people to boycott foreign goods and adopt domestic products. He promoted *khadi* (spinning and weaving cotton), an ideology for self-reliance and self-government.
3. Under the Maratha Empire (1718-1818), the Peshwa were the

ministers and the chief executives to the king. They held the highest office and also controlled the Maratha Empire or Maratha Confederacy in the Deccan Plateau of the south-west of present-day India.

4. K. S. Singh (Ed), *Tribal Movements in India*. R. B. Lal, *Socio-religious Movement among the tribals of South Gujarat*, Manohar Publication, New Delhi, 1983, p. 287.
5. Ibid. p. 288.
6. K. S. Singh (Ed), *Tribal Movements in India*, 1983. William Ekka and A. K. Danda, *The Tribal Movements in India: The Halpati Movement among the 'Dublas' of South Gujarat*, New Delhi, pp. 173-74. The Dublas constitute the largest tribal group in South Gujarat. Their original name is not known. It is said that they were referred to as 'dubla' because of their impoverished condition, as this means 'weak' or 'thin'. This was considered to be a pejorative term by the people (Breman, 1974) so Gandhi named them the Halpati.
7. Ibid. Vallabhbhai Patel (one of the leaders of the Indian National Congress from Gujarat who led a mass mobilization during the freedom struggle) formally used the name Dubla or Halpati on 26 January 1939 to address the issues of exploited bonded Dubla labourers and their masters. Etymologically, the term derives from the word *hal* or plough and means one who ploughs or holds the plough.
8. Priyavadan M. Patel, *Politics and Mobilization of Lower Classes*. Available at http://www.democracyasia.org/resourcesondemocracy/Politics%20and%20Mobilization%20of%20Lower%20Classes_priyavadanmpatel.pdf
9. I. P. Desai, *The Vedchhi Movement*, Surat (mimeograph), 1969.
10. A center from where Mahatma Gandhi launched the *Bardoli Satyagraha*, a great farmer's movement which was largely joined by the tribals and dalits under the leadership of Vallabhbhai Patel.
11. *This girl is very dangerous*, by Jyotirmay Sharma. *The Hindu*, 10 April 2005.
12. Homespun *khaddad/khadi* or white cotton *saree* worn by women followers of Gandhi were a symbolic message of cultural pride as opposed to European manufactured clothes. It was a symbol of self-reliance and solidarity with the Indian masses during the freedom struggle. Sarala Devi, Gandhian leader, prolific writer and founder of the first women's organization in India, writes that her saree impressed her audiences more than her speeches...
13. *Satyagraha*, loosely translated as 'insistence through truth' or 'holding on to truth', is the term that was coined and developed by Gandhi during the independence movement and his earlier struggle for rights in Africa.
14. M. V. Kamat, *Gandhi's Coolie: Life & Times of Ramkrishna Bajaj*, 1995, p. 24.
15. *Sabarmati Ashram*, also known as Gandhi Ashram, is located in the Sabarmati suburb of Ahmedabad in Gujarat, on the banks of the Sabarmati River. Mahatma Gandhi and Kasturba Gandhi lived here for nearly 12 years. The famous *Satyagraha* salt began in the same place.
16. The term *Harijans* literary means children of Hari or God Vishu which was popularized by Mahatma Gandhi for referring to Dalits (considered as Untouchable in the Indian Caste system).
17. M. G. Lion Agrawal (Ed), *Women in Non-Cooperation and in Civil Disobedience, Freedom fighters of India, Volume 4*, ISHA Books, New Delhi, 2008, p. 172.
18. Ibid.
19. *Salt Problems and Salt March*, by Dr. Shubhangi Rathi, Available at http://www.mk Gandhi.org/articles/salt_march.html
20. *This girl is very dangerous*, by Jyotirmay Sharma. *The Hindu*, 10 April 2005.
21. Ibid

[This story is based on a literature review and interactions with the people worked with Dashriben]

PART - III

**CONTEMPORARY
HEORINES**

[6]

**DR. TULASI MUNDA [1947-]
An Agent of Change**



“Education doesn't necessarily mean that you become a doctor or an engineer. I am educating the children to become good citizens of tomorrow. The goal of education is to improve lives”.

There is a saying in Odia literature, '*Tulasi dui potro ru baase*' ('A basil plant can be identified by the fragrance of its two budding leaves'). In other words, a person's potential shines through at a young age. Tulasi Munda's name and life stand in testimony to this.

A living legend in Odisha, Tulasi Munda was born on 15 July 1947 –exactly one month before India achieved Independence. She would have hardly understood what 'independence' or 'freedom' meant for the people of India but she grew up with her own notion of freedom –freedom from poverty, freedom from the bondage of child labor, freedom from ignorance and illiteracy, freedom from the practice of superstitions and alcoholism etc., problems that had prevailed in her community for years.

From a very young age, she felt an urge to bring good fortune to her people by dispelling the darkness of ignorance through literacy. What makes Tulasi Munda extraordinary is that she herself never attended school but brought education to less fortunate children. As a young child who once worked in coal mines to support her family, Tulasi triggered a silent revolution in Odisha. Today, under the umbrella of the Adivasi Vikas Samiti (Society for Tribal Development), she has released hundreds of children from working in the mines and has transformed more than 20,000 young lives by establishing 17 teaching centers in Keonjhar, Odisha. Her village, which was once in the grip of illiteracy, poverty and underdevelopment, now boasts a model school that has become a catalyst for change.

Tulasi was born into a poor Munda family in Kainshi village of Keonjhar, Odisha, which is one of the country's 200 most backward districts. At the time when widespread development in the fields of production, industrialization, agriculture, communication, education, science and technology systems was shaping Post-Independence India, Tulasi and her people could see only streams of lorries on muddy roads carrying coal and iron ore, passing through their village. They just barely eked out a living by mining and quarrying amidst noxious fumes.

Mineral exploration in the district had begun as early as the 1960s as sponge iron, manganese, chromium ore, bauxite and limestone were available in plenty. Keonjhar district accounts for the highest number of miners in Odisha followed by Sundargarh and Angul.¹ Despite living on mineral-rich lands, tribal communities barely shared in the mining profits.

There was poverty all around, and the children had no future. The state's "steel revolution" meant very little to children like Tulasi, who had to be content with a meal at the end of the day or with a few rupees for working in the mines, washing dishes in *dhabas* (roadside food stalls) or taking out someone's cattle

and goats to graze.

Tulasi was the youngest of seven children. Her father died when she was just five. Her family toiled day and night to survive. At the age of 12, she went to her sister's place in Serenda, a small town in Joda Tehsil nearly 65 km from her village. Being a hub of the steel industry, the town certainly had something to offer Tulasi. During her stay in Serenda, she worked in the mines - quarrying and filtering iron from waste materials. For her hard labour, Tulasi earned Rs. 2/- (\$ 0.03) a week. This small income gave some relief to her widowed mother and family.

However, Tulasi was passionate about learning to read and write. During her free time, she would try to write the alphabet and read her brother's books. Her desire to learn became a reality when she met Malati Devi Chaudhary, a freedom fighter and Gandhian during her visit to Jodipada in Keonjhar. She attended the public meeting and carefully listened to her speech. During the speech, Malati Devi asked those who were interested in joining her in her social work to stand up. Fourteen-year-old Tulasi eagerly stood up and expressed her desire to join her.

During the early 20th century, women in Odisha, under the leadership of Sarala Devi, Roma Devi and Malati Devi, awoke from their age-old slumber and devoted themselves wholeheartedly to the national movement.² Malati Devi, the daughter of a barrister, was a mass leader in her own right. While studying in Shantiniketan (a university established by Rabindranath Tagore), she was inspired by her teacher, Mr Pearson (an Englishman), to work for the tribals.³ In those days, when government officers were reluctant to travel to rural tribal areas, Malti Devi visited many places in Koraput, Phulbani, Keonjhar, and Ganjam in Odisha to experience the life of the poor and emphasize the importance of education in

constructing a new India. Influenced by these leaders, Tulasi realized her call to gain more knowledge and share it among her deprived people.

Tulasi joined the Utkal Navajeevan Mandal, an organization which promoted adult education established by Malti Devi and her husband in Angul. Here she began her studies and also learnt to spin cotton yarn on the *charkha* (spinning wheel). During this time, she met other prominent leaders and social reformers such as Nabakrishna Choudhary, Roma Devi and Nirmala Deshpandey.

Between 1962 and 1965, she received training in social work at Indore, Madhya Pradesh and joined Bihar Bhoodan Gramdan Abhiyan⁴ (movement to donate land to the landless in Bihar). She met Vinobha Bhave⁵ during his visit to Odisha on the *Bhoodan Padayattra* (march for land donation) and was inspired by his mission to donate land to the poor landless and improve their lives. She started spreading the message of *Bhoodan* (land donation) by traveling to villages in Odisha and other parts of the country. She also followed his teachings and principles of *Ahimsa* (non-violence) and *Sarvodaya* (welfare for all) throughout her life.

After gaining adequate exposure for Post-Independence developments, particularly the women's movement in India, Tulasi Munda returned to her village in Serenda. Still in her teens, she was clear about her mission. She knew what steps had to be taken to achieve success.

However, it was not easy for her to persuade people to invest in education when they were barely making ends meet. Tulasi went from house to house looking for children to school. Initially, parents were simply not willing to leave their children in her care but, slowly, a few children turned up. She started teaching the children of mine workers under a '*mahula*' or

'*mahuwa*' (madhulika indica) tree –her first school.

Tulasi's life mission was no less than that of the *mahuwa* tree. The *mahuwa* is a tree that refuses to die easily. It may remain barren throughout the cruel autumn but, when spring comes, new branches and green leaves cover the tree, yielding many flowers and fruits that provide sustenance to the tribals and forest dwellers in many parts of India. Slowly, Tulasi's autumn too ended and her efforts paid off as 30 children enrolled. Most children worked in the mines during the day so Tulasi started teaching them in the evening.

Having no academic background, she initially began telling them stories of the freedom movement and national heroes. She also taught them basic numeracy and literacy as, she says, "I was an illiterate and knew nothing of bookish knowledge but I had come to know about the importance of education and had enough practical knowledge to impart it."⁶

She started to sell traditional *mudhi* (puffed rice), a staple food in Odisha, and vegetables to raise funds for her school. She began to help people read their medical prescriptions, write letters, applications and sign off on bills. Impressed by her dedication and commitment, people began to understand the importance of education and started sending their children to her school. She thus gained the confidence of the villagers and they even started providing food and a place for her to live. They also helped in the construction of a small school by providing a small plot of land with a stone wall and a tin shed. In 1966, she shifted to a new school on the outskirts of the village. Even infants came to her school. When the children went home, she lived alone there, surrounded by dense forest. She started providing students who completed the 5th grade with a certificate which helped them gain employment in mining companies.

She encouraged educated youths to volunteer as teachers as she had no money to pay salaries. Slowly, her students offered to pay a fee for their education, which was a major milestone in her mission. Donations also began to come in from industrial firms, foreign agencies and individual donors. Today, she charges a minimum fee for the hostel accommodation but only from those who can afford to pay.

In 1986, she founded the Adivasi Vikas Samiti (Society for Tribal Development), which promotes the development of human potential, healthcare services, self-help groups, cooperative savings, employment and forest preservation. The society also helped build a concrete residential school building with classrooms, staff offices and toilets. The Society has 11 executive members, is equally represented by men and women and is headed by Tulasi Munda, who is the Secretary.

Today, her school provides education up to the 10th grade. Over the years, Tulasi has helped establish 17 schools or outreach centers in areas that lacked even basic amenities such as drinking water, a reliable power supply and healthcare. She has successfully educated nearly 20,000 boys and girls. At the main campus at Serenda, the school provides food and lodging at a nominal cost. She has also emphasized the need for girls' education.

Even though she is criticized by many for taking funds from industrial firms that often damage human health, the environment and natural resources, many of her admirers send regular donations to keep her school running.

Tulasi's perspective on education is one of self-reliance. She says, "Education doesn't necessarily mean that you become a doctor or an engineer. I am educating the children to become good citizens of tomorrow. The goal of education is to improve lives."⁷ To substantiate that fact, today many of her students

have become drivers, shopkeepers, businessmen, contractors, mine supervisors and many have even pursued higher degrees. With the education they have received they cannot easily be cheated at their work places.

Tulasi has also turned her village, Kainshi, into an ideal village. Every house has a toilet and tap water and the village has smooth roads, a high school and a healthcare center. While she used to visit villages in the vicinity on a bicycle, she now uses a van which also doubles up as an ambulance to take patients to the healthcare center.

A star attraction for political parties, Tulasi has turned down several offers to stand for election from almost every political party. Being Gandhian, she says, "Our motto is to sacrifice and serve, not indulge in fanfare."⁸

A leader is one who knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way. She has led anti-liquor drives when she realized that alcoholism was sapping the daily wages of laborers dry and leaving nothing for their children's education or to run their homes. A number of villages in her area have now gone liquor free. She filed a Public Interest Litigation at the Odisha High Court seeking a total ban on the manufacture and sale of liquor in the state. Tulasi has also fought corruption, displacement, labor exploitation and other anti-social activities such as the practice of superstition and the exploitation of women.

Awards and recognitions

The number of awards and recognitions that have been bestowed on her are testament to Tulasi Munda's great contributions:

- 2014: CNN-IBN-Senior Citizen Awards –The Unstoppable
- 2014: The Honoris Causa Award (Doctoral Degree) by the Ravenshaw University, Odisha
- 2013: A degree of Honoris Causa by the Central University of

Odisha, Koraput

2011: Living Legend Award for Excellence in social service by the Govt. of Odisha

2009: Laxmipat Singhania National Leadership Award, New Delhi

2008: Kadambini Samman, by Kadambini Odia Magazine, Odisha

2001: Padmashree Award given by Hon'ble President of India

2000: Brave Women Award given by the Chief Minister of Odisha, Naveen Patnaik

1999: Swabhiman Award given by the Chief Minister of Odisha, Giridhar Gomango

1998: Award from Bharatiya Adimjati Sevak Sangha, New Delhi

1997: Ananya, by Sahitya Sanskruti Parisad, Joda, Keonjhar

1981: Samaj Seva Award by Barbil Municipality, Keonjhar

Tuasli Munda has touched and transformed innumerable lives yet remains a down to earth person. And yet despite the giant strides she has taken to improve the lives of the poor, she continues to strive to eliminate the socio-economic gaps, injustices and inequality that still exist in Indian society. The lives of tribal people have been shattered and destroyed because of large-scale displacement caused by mining and industrialization, land grabbing, deforestation, water contamination, pollution, fatal health risks and unemployment, causing distress to the young people and pushing them into anti-social activities.

It is painful to see children being born amidst the sounds of blasting mines, noise from crusher units, and the movement of hundreds of trucks day in and day out. They grow up with lungs full of dust left behind by the trucks and poisonous fumes from the mines. Tulasi therefore continues to worry about the future of young children as well as the government's apathy in handling the trafficking of minors and young girls in the region.

In her own capacity, against all odds, Tulasi Munda tries to improve the lives of the downtrodden but, despite her wide recognition, both the public and private sector have done very

Endnotes:

1. Umesh Chandra Devata, "Profile of Mine Workers in Orissa", Orissa Review, May-June 2010, available at <http://odisha.gov.in/e-magazine/Orissareview/2010/May-June/engpdf/60-65.pdf>
2. Jayanta Kumar Das, "The Veteran Trio", Orissa Review, January 2009, Available at <http://odisha.gov.in/emagazine/Orissareview/2009/Jan/engpdf/30-32.pdf>
3. *Civil Participation*, Volume 1, No1, April-June 2004, New Delhi, Also available at http://www.indianetzone.com/3/malati_nabakrushna_choudhar.htm
4. *Eminent Personality, Padmashri Tulasi Munda*. Available at <http://www.kendujhar.nic.in/tulasif.htm>
5. During the 20th century, Vinoba Bhave walked some 70,000 km for 14 years in India and received around 4.2 million acres of land in donation for landless people. It was a sign of compassion and love in the history of mankind. He also denounced 'idol worship' and promoted 'universal brotherhood' in order to serve fellow human beings as service to God. See <http://www.vinobabhav.org/>
6. Illiterate Herself, She Brings Education to Fellow Tribals, *Outlook*, March 2007. Available at <http://www.outlookindia.com/article/illiterate-herself-she-brings-education-to-fellow-tribals/209126>
7. Unschooling Gandhian tribal runs schools for mine workers' children, *Hindustan Times*, Nov 14, 2009.
8. Ibid.

[This story is based on a literature review and interactions with Tulasi Munda in conferences and workshops]



Iron contaminated Koena river flowing through Serenda forest



A woman collecting drinking water from a stream



Photo: The Hindu

Iron ore nuggets stacked for transport near Katasahi in Keonjhar



Children playing at a village



Taking care of toddler



Children going to school



For the love of reading



Tulasi Munda receiving Padmashree Award from the President K. R. Narayanan

Photos from Saranda contributed by Gladson Dungdung

[5]

Gaura Devi [1925-1991]

Daughter of the Forest, Mother of the Chipko Movement



“Forests are like our maternal home (maika). We get herbs, fuel, fruits and vegetables from them. Cutting the forests will result in floods. We are going to hug the trees. If you cut the trees down, first you will have to hit us with your axes.”

On the morning of 26 March 1974, Gaura Devi was busy as usual with the household chores. Meanwhile, a young girl, Bali Devi, spotted some men marching towards the forest with luggage and equipment that indicated that they were forest laborers and contractors on their way to fell trees. She ran to inform Gaura Devi –the leader of the *Mahila Mandal*, a local women's group. Gaura Devi quickly went around the village and called in the other women.

Bhatti Devi was weaving a blanket in her small hut. Her mother-in-law alerted her, “They have come!”

Others said, “Come sister, let's go, they have come.”

Bhatti Devi immediately stopped weaving and followed them. Nearly 30 women, children, and elders went up to the mountain in pursuit of the men. Among them were Mahadevi, Bhusi Devi, Nrityi Devi, Leelamati, Uma Devi, Harki Devi, Bali Devi, Pasa Devi, Rupsa Devi, Tiladhi Devi and Indra Devi. Gaura Devi led them to the logging camp. When they reached the camp they saw that some of the men were eating while others were still cooking. Some had been drinking. Gaura Devi pleaded, “Brothers, this forest nurtures us like a mother. Please don't cut the trees and return back.”

Some men seemed to relent but others, who had been drinking, abused and threatened them with dire consequences. One even pointed a gun at them. Gaura Devi unwaveringly stood before them and said,

“We are going to hug the trees. If you cut the trees down, first you will have to hit us with your axes!”

Women and children rushed forward to hug the trees. At the same time, another group of women broke the bridge, a small concrete slab that led to the forest. Some of them even lay down to block the road. The contractor shouted,

“What do you think of yourself? We will strip you naked and send you back to your village.”

Another said, “We will put you in jail.”

But the women were determined to confront them. C.S. Lakshmi, writer and researcher wrote in *The Hindu* in May 2000, “The women stood in a row, each one of them looking as if the mountain goddess Nanda Devi had taken one of her fierce forms. They then chased the laborers for nearly two kilometers and broke the cement bridge leading to the forests. A group of them sat guarding the rest of the men and kept vigil throughout

the night.”¹

The next day, the men of the village returned from Chamoli where they had gone to obtain compensation from the district headquarters for the land acquired by the army during the Indo-China War (1962). They had already learnt about the victory that had been scored by the women of the village.

They continued to be vigilant for three days and nights to prevent the felling of trees. The news had reached many villages and they too joined them. This was one of the landmark events in the history of the global environmental movement and Gaura Devi became a living legend in the Himalaya region, globally known for her Gandhian noble method of non-violent resistance by hugging the trees to protect them from being felled for commercial timber harvesting, also known as the Chipko Movement. Chipko means, “to hug” or “to cling on”. Nowhere in the world had something like Chipko ever been witnessed or experienced. It became a model movement for thousands of eco-groups in many countries.

The child bride

Gaura Devi was born in 1925 into a Bhotiya/Bhutia (Marchha) tribal family of Lata village in Niti Valley of Chamoli district, Uttarakhand. The area around was lushly forested, the woods were a source of crucial inputs for the traditional agro-pastoral economy of the hills. Around this time, many of the villagers operated a successful wool trade across the Indo-Tibetan border until India's war with China in 1962 sealed the trade route. Having no other option, the villagers were forced into marginal farming in over-populated mountain areas.

As a small girl, Gaura often accompanied her mother to the forest to collect firewood and tend to their sheep and goats. She would often wonder aloud why her mother walked miles to

collect dried broken branches and twigs instead of cutting the big trees that stood near their home. Her mother would then teach little Gaura the importance of Nature in their life and in the community. The forest, her mother explained, was like a mother that provided beautiful flowers, fresh fruits, roots, medical herbs, firewood and fodder for their animals. The big trees protected the small plants and also gave shelter to birds and animals. The trees provided fresh air. The roots of the trees held the earth and prevented the occurrence of landslides and floods during the monsoons. These lessons from her mother left a deep impact on Gaura's thinking.

As she grew up, Gaura was trained in her family's wool trade. In keeping with the tradition of those days, she was married off at the age of 12 to Meherban Singh from the nearby village of Reni in Chamoli. Meherban was a farmer with a smallholding; he also reared cattle and traded wool. They were not prosperous, but not terribly poor either.² The combination of agriculture and animal husbandry, and the gains from trade, assured them an income somewhat in excess of a peasant family living in the plains.³ Unfortunately, after 10 years of marriage Meherban died, so Gaura was widowed at a very young age. To make ends meet and to raise her only son, Chander Singh and support Meherban's parents, she took over her family's wool trade. However the Indo-China War brought business to a standstill. With great difficulty, Gaura provided for her family by undertaking small-scale farming. When her son grew up and took up farming, Gaura found some time off from her household chores and involved herself in community endeavors. In 1972, she went on to become the head of the *Mahila Mandal* (women's self-help group) of the village.

What led to the Chipko Movement?

Before the British came to India, the forests adequately met the needs of the economy. During his first expedition to the

Himalayas in 1817, Thomas Skinner, a British army officer, was left stunned by the bountiful forests and valleys. Soon the British colonized Dehradun, Massouri and Roorkee. The construction of the upper Ganges Canal (1842-54) led to the establishment of a workshop and an iron foundry for its maintenance, followed by the Thomason College of Civil Engineering in 1854, which is now known as the Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT) Roorkee. The establishment of the British Army Cantonment and India's first locomotive railway service began in 1886. By 1907, the railway line in Uttarakhand had been extended from Moradabad to Roorkee via Haridwar and the first provincial trunk road that connected Meerut, Roorkee and Dehradun was constructed the same year.⁴

Further, the British took over Garhwal and Kumaon regions in 1851. With the growth of the population in the region, Chamoli became a *Tehsil* (an administration division) and police stations were established in Alomora, Nainital and Ranikhet. In 1864, the British set up India's first Imperial Forest Department and passed the Forest Act in 1865 in order to enable revenue generation, easy communication and transportation. They did this by constructing roads, railways, bridges and dams. The administration also encouraged the expansion of agriculture by clearing forests, which led to massive deforestation. Forest resources such as *sal* and *deodar* timber were also used in large quantities for making railway lines.

In 1862, in his report on the forests of submontane tracts (lower mountain slopes), Henry Ramsay, the Commissioner of Kumaon and Garhwal estimated that 100,000 to 150,000 sleepers could be supplied annually from the forests.⁵ He himself held around 26 acres of land in Almora for residential-cum-administrative purpose. By the end of the 19th century, a large proportion of the forests in Uttarakhand had been opened up for timber extraction.

After the World Wars (1914-18 & 1939-45), industrial expansion created new demands for forest products for raw materials and fuel. The construction of roads itself was destructive to forests but, more than that, these roads opened up the forests to further destruction.⁶

The commercialization of wood and the steady increase in number of logging companies destroyed forests and caused loss of livelihood for local people. This resulted in the growth of political activism in the Himalayan region. After the Indo-China War, drastic changes in development and economic growth occurred but the local people derived very little benefits. Over the next century, the Forest Department withdrew the rights of the hill communities to forest lands. They were prohibited from using the wood that was needed to make farm tools, build houses and roofs, and for serving as fodder and firewood. Forest resources that were previously only used for survival were exploited for commercial gain.

Emergence of Chipko Leaders

Inspired by the Gandhian principles of *Sarvodaya* (progress for all), Chandi Prasad Bhatt, known as the Green Hero, and other social workers formed the Dasholi Gram Swarajya Sangh (DGSS- Society for Village Self-Rule) in Gopeshwar in 1964, which became the mother organization of the Chipko Movement. Chandi Prasad expressed deep concern over the plight of the mountain people as a shortage in farmland, rising unemployment, alcoholism and oppressive government forest policies had brought them to their knees. The DGSS emphasized the creation of employment opportunities by relying on local resources. This was done through by promoting weaving, beekeeping, herb collecting, and through cottage industries that sustainably use forest products.⁷ With this, the cooperative was able to provide employment for around 1,000 locals between 1969 and 1972, even though they faced

restrictive policies.

From 1973 on, however, the Forest Department refused to allow access to the trees the locals used to make household and agricultural equipment. Instead, the trees were auctioned off to the Simon Company, a sports goods manufacturer in Allahabad. Forest lands were often auctioned to big city contractors who brought in their own skilled and semi-skilled laborers, leaving only the menial jobs for the hill people. On the other hand, the hill regions saw an influx of more people from the outside, which only added to the ecological strain. A dire consequence of this was the Alaknanda flood (20 July 1970), which swept away hundreds of homes, villages, roads and bridges. Nearly 200 people died and large-scale damage was caused to the forests and to property.

In March 1972, just before the arrival of Simon Company agents at Gopeshwar to supervise the cutting of trees, Chandi Prasad and the villagers held a meeting and discussed the situation. A number of ideas were shared, such as barring the entrance to the forest, stopping the trucks from hauling away trees by lying in front of them, or destroying the trees themselves. Finally, Chandi Prasad suggested that they should not resort to any hostile measures but, instead, cling on to or hug the trees, and dare the company workers to let their axes fall on their backs.

Soon the villagers, especially the women, started organizing themselves into several smaller groups, taking up local causes with the authorities, and standing up against commercial logging operations. Many protests and rallies were held in different places, with little effect until a decision to take direct action was made. Over the next few weeks, meetings continued in the Reni area which resulted in the famous protest at which Gaura Devi and other women hugged the trees.

Throughout the bitter winters and the following summers, women continued to camp in the forest day and night for

nearly eight years. Many of them even tied *Rakhi* (a thread symbolizing affection and protection from any harm) to the trees. They organized rallies with slogans and folk songs to raise people's awareness. Whenever they protested, they were put in jail but they did not give up. There were no speeches, no books, no newspapers, but there were folk songs. The songs of the Chipko movement echoed through the hills and forests everywhere.

As a result, the Chief Minister of Uttarakhand agreed to set up a committee of experts to investigate the situation. In its report, the committee said that the Reni forest was a sensitive area, that no trees should be felled in and around the Alakhnanda watershed and that a 10-year ban should be put on all tree-felling in an area of over 450 square miles.

The first victory of the Chipko movement was followed by many more successes. Over the years, the movement spread throughout the country and a ban on felling trees was imposed in other states such as Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka (Appiko Movement 1983), Rajasthan, Bihar, Western Ghats and Vindhayas. More than 100,000 trees were saved from felling and, by 1981, over a million trees had been planted by Chipko workers. A research study by S. N. Prasad at the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore showed that the survival rate of saplings at the DGSS plantations was as high as 70 percent, whereas the figure for the Forest Department plantations lay between 20 to 50 percent.⁸

Gaura Devi's indomitable courage and prudence gave a new outlook to the Chipko movement. She also became a member of the Advisory Committee for rural programs at All India Radio, Najibabad. Although she came from a life of hardship, she was determined to contribute to a better world. As the renowned environmentalist and scientist Vandana Shiva said in an interview to *India Today*:

“The Chipko movement gave us the environment department initially and then the environment ministry. It also gave us a whole new set of laws, the Environment Protection Act, the Forest Conservation Act, the entire legacy that governs us today. I always tell people that I learnt my quantum theory in the University of Western Ontario in Canada and I learnt my ecology in the University of Chipko in Uttarakhand.”⁹

An unfinished mission

Under the leadership of Gaura Devi, the people of Reni not only saved 25,000 trees but created mass awareness about forest conservation. Gaura Devi went from village to village and inspired women to participate. She not only united them but created a new generation of leaders. Her ideas always served public interests –protecting the environment, women's emancipation and social awakening. Gaura Devi achieved all this at a time when women were bound by traditional gender roles and, by her example, women who had never stepped out of their homes started to think about and participate in community development initiatives. Today, many women of the region lead *Van Pachayats* (Forest Councils). Their awareness and activism is not restricted to issues pertaining to the forests but also aimed at solving other problems related to water supply, healthcare, education and alcoholism.

The Chipko movement was successful, but it did not end all problems. As many as 13 national parks and wildlife sanctuaries, such as the Jim Corbett National Park (1962), Nanda Devi National Park (1982) and Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve (1992), were established. These sanctuaries covered 13.8 percent of the total area of Uttarakhand. The government also took complete control of the forests and natural resources. Villagers lost access to pastures for grazing their domestic animals and Chipko workers, who throughout their lives had protected the forests, were suddenly considered

thieves and smugglers in the eyes of the government.¹⁰

While Reni village is proud of the Chipko movement, the residents also feel distressed that such little development has taken place in the village.

In 1986, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi named Gaura Devi and the leaders of 30 others women's groups of Dasholi Gram Swarajya Sangh (Society for Village Self-Rule) as "Friends of the Trees". In 2009, the Uttarakhand government launched the Gaura Devi Kanyadhan Yojna, a scheme to promote the education of girls and in 2011 the Ministry of Environment and Forest announced the Gaura Devi Award for environmental protection. While the awards are one part of the story, the true legacy of Gaura Devi lies in living the philosophy she lived by and working towards making this universe a better place for everyone.

The Original Tree Huggers (1730)

The original Chipko or ecological movement dates back to 1730 A.D. and was led by the Bishnoi community of Rajasthan, known for its great reverence and love of conservation. As cutting of trees was prohibited on religious grounds, you would find an abundance of *Khejari* trees (*Prosopis cineraria*) and other lush greenery in Bishnoi villages even though they were situated in the Thar Desert. During this time, Maharaja Abhay Singh of Jodhpur ordered his men to cut down trees so that they could be used in the construction of his new palace.

Listening to the sound of falling trees, a brave Bishnoi woman, Amrita Devi, rushed to the place and begged the soldiers to stop. They agreed to do so in exchange for a bribe but Amrita Devi refused to pay it, and instead offered her life to save the trees saying, "सर सांते रुख रहे तो भी सास्तो जान" / "Sar sāntey rūkh rahe to bhī sasto jān" (If a tree is

saved even at the cost of one's head, it's worth it.) A soldier struck her with an axe. When her three young daughters saw what their heroic mother had done, they too came forward and sacrificed their lives.

On hearing this, a large group of Bishnois from 84 villages protested and 363 men, women and children laid down their lives. When the king learnt of the massacre, he stopped his men and prohibited the killing of animals and cutting of trees in Bishnoi region. Even today, peacocks, deer and wildlife roam freely around the villages. Commemorating the martyrs, a Bishnoi Temple and Cenotaph has been built at Khejarli Kalan village in Jodhpur.¹¹

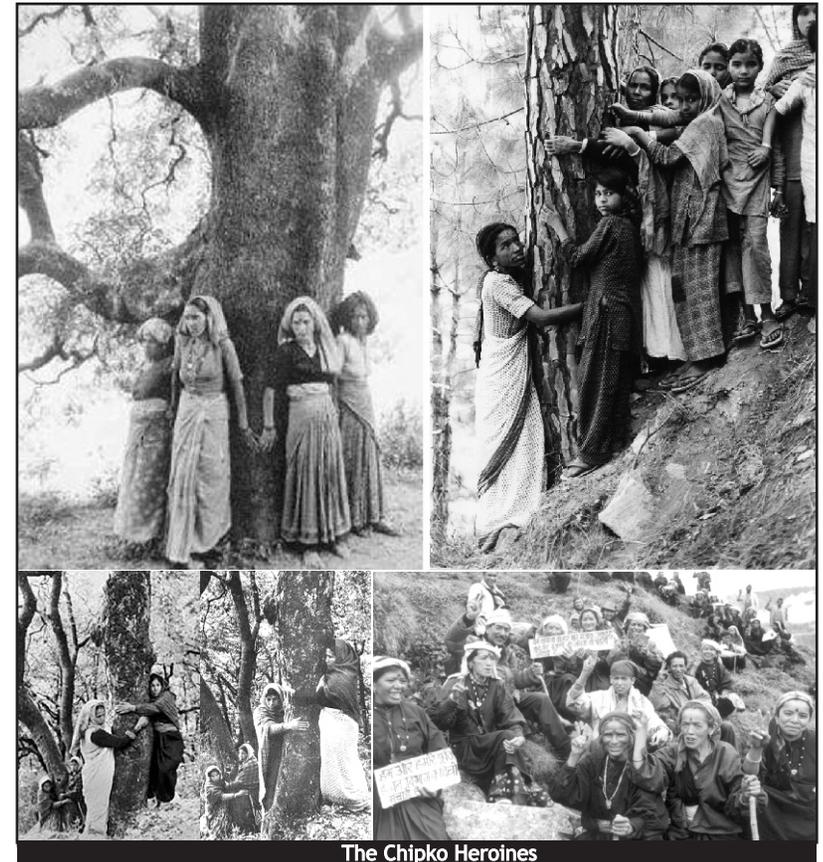
A Cautionary Tale

Gaura Devi, who passed away quietly in July 1991, often referred to the forests as her maternal home - जंगल हमारे मैत (मायका) हैं. She would caution the wood cutters and contractors saying, "Brothers, these forests are like our maternal home (*maika*). We get herbs, fuel, fruits and vegetables from them. Cutting the forests will result in floods. Our fields will be washed away. Please have your food, and come with us to our village. When our men come, we will collectively take a decision."¹² But they ignored her.

Gaura Devi's wisdom became a harsh reality in June 2013 as devastating floods hit not only Uttarakhand but four other North Indian states as well. The floods claimed nearly 5,000 lives, leaving thousands homeless and causing irreparable ecological destruction. All the revenues collected through timber extraction were meager compared to the havoc caused and the loss of precious lives.

Endnotes:

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11. The first Chipko movement. Available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khejarli#The_first_Chipko_movement
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The Chipko Heroines



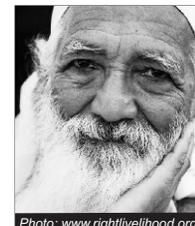
Chandi Prasad Bhatt, founder of Dasholi Gram Swarajya Sangh in 1964, which became mother organization of Chipko Movement

Photo: www.realheroes.com.org



Photo: www.iisd.ca

Bali Devi Rana, one of the associates of Gaura Devi, at the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) Conference, Nairobi (Kenya) in 2004. She has been the head of Reni's Mahila Mandal Dal (Women Welfare Group) since over 25 years. She was Secretary in 1974 when Gaura Devi was the President who led the women of Reni village to the most daring and dramatic action in the Chipko movement.



Gandhian Sundarlal Bahuguna, one of the prominent messengers of Chipko, who took a 5,000-kilometre trans-Himalaya foot march in 1981-83, spreading the Chipko message to a far greater area

Photo: www.rightlivelife.org



Photo: www.flicker.com

A dire consequence of ecological strain. Alaknanda Flood 1970, which swept away hundreds of homes, villages, roads and bridges. Nearly 200 people died and large-scale damage was caused to the forests and to property.



Photo: Akash Bishr/www.rediff.com



Photo: The Hindu

Devastated Kedarnath in June, 2013 A bridge over Mandakini river & the national highway being washed away



Photo: tehelka.com

Kedarnath after the flood in June, 2014

PROLOGUE

Rich Lands, Poor Tribals: Mining Boom and Displacement in India

The Preamble to the Indian Constitution states: “WE, THE PEOPLE OF INDIA, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a SOVEREIGN SOCIALIST SECULAR DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC and to secure to all its citizens: JUSTICE, social, economic and political; LIBERTY of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; EQUALITY of status and of opportunity; and to promote among them all FRATERNITY assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the Nation...”

The Constitution also provides several special provisions for protecting the interests of Scheduled Tribes (STs). A separate Ministry for Tribal Affairs was setup in 1999. In order to ensure speedy trial of cases under the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, special courts and special police stations for offenses against SCs and STs were setup in a number of states. The National Commission for STs, a Constitutional Ombudsman body, runs under Article 338A (89th Amendment, 2003) of the Constitution and has wide powers to protect and promote the interests of STs.

Nonetheless, over the years, tribal people have continued to suffer as a result of land alienation and development-induced displacement throughout the country. They have been systematically dispossessed of their ancestral land and livelihood resources under the nexus of state power and

corporate looting. They are anguished by the fact that even the legislative, executive and judicial institutions are influenced by the political establishment and corporate power. It is most unfortunate that “the freedom to live in their own land in their traditional ways” guaranteed by the Constitution is ignored by those claiming to be the “keeper of the Constitution” with their political and corporate power.

The Provision of Panchayats Extension in Scheduled Areas Act (PESA), 1996 which makes important provisions for autonomous village councils in the scheduled areas and the Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers Recognition of Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006 which gives individual as well as community rights over forest, land and resources, have been violated by the government itself. In 69-years of India's independence and national development, tribals have paid the highest price for the development by being forced off their land and territories. Government policies and approaches have been so apathetic to the problem of displacement that they have not even cared to collect proper statistics in this regard.

Studies conducted on displacement in many states pointed out that over 60 million people have been displaced by developmental projects since independence: 40% of those displaced are tribals who constitute 8% of the country's total population, 20% are dalits and another 20% are often landless people such as fishing communities and quarry workers.¹ The study of displacement in Jharkhand from 1951-95 by Ekka and Asif reveals that while the number of the displaced persons in Jharkhand caused from dams was 75%, the total number of the people displaced from industries was 34%, from mining 29.6%, from defence establishments 89.7%, from wildlife and national parks 15.8% and from infrastructure development 27.6%.² This means a total number of 41.27% tribals in Jharkhand were displaced from 1951-1995. Another study by Lourdu Swami

shows that 74% of the displaced have not been rehabilitated.³

While about 90% of Indian coal and 80% of its other minerals are found in tribal areas,⁴ 85% of tribals live below the poverty line. In this situation, people are forced to migrate to other states and metropolitan areas to take on menial jobs. They have no education and have been victims of trafficking, rape and other types of violence.

Dayamani Barla is one of many crusaders for land rights and the tribal movement in Jharkhand.

Endnotes:

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Villagers on their 50th day of sit in protest against Nagri displacement near Ranchi



Villagers demolishing the boundary wall put around their cultivable land



Policemen watching Nagri farmers harvesting paddy



Distributing paddy seeds to sensitize the govt. authorities



The tea stall run by Dayamani and her family where great minds meet to discuss pressing socio-political issues



A press conference after their car was attacked by one of the extremist groups during the Lok Sabha 2014 election campaign



Bearing the burden of deforestation: A woman carrying dried leaves for cooking food near Ranchi in Jharkhand

Photo: Alma Grace Barla

[7]

DAYAMANI BARLA [1964-] Iron Lady Of Jharkhand



"I learnt to write with my fingers in the mud and sand of this land. On the banks of the river Karo, while grazing my sheep, I learnt to bathe and swim. The shade of grass and trees covered with dew filled in the sky, gave me love; how can I sell this?"

Better known as the "Iron Lady of Jharkhand", Dayamani Barla has been a powerful voice for the voiceless adivasis of Jharkhand and global indigenous community. A self-made woman who once worked as a domestic help to meet her school fees, she is the recipient of many national and international awards for her contributions to journalism and activism. In 2013, she was honored with the Ellen L. Lutz Indigenous Rights Award by Cultural Survival (an international indigenous peoples' rights organization in New York), in recognition of her "outstanding human rights work, dedicated leadership for Indigenous Peoples' rights, and a deep life commitment to protecting, sustaining, and revitalizing Indigenous cultures, lands, and languages".¹ She has also

received the Chingari Award for Women against Corporate Crime (2008), the National Foundation for India Fellowship (2004), and the Counter Media Award (2001) instituted by the eminent journalist P. Sainath for rural journalists who work to uplift the downtrodden.

Apathfinder

“I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; you shall be a blessing.”

This Bible quotation and a few photos shot by Dayamani herself hang on the wall of the small tea stall she runs on Ranchi's Club Road. This tea stall is no ordinary stall; on the contrary it is a very special one. The walls are witness to her life's work. Amidst the noise of the traffic, this unsophisticated place is where intellectual minds meet to discuss pressing socio-political issues. Dayamani considers the tea stall the best place to listen to the voice of the common people, often with a cup of *chai* (tea) and *pakoda* or *dhoska* (local snacks). The food she serves not only sustains her family economically but provides a livelihood for around ten people who silently work in the backyard of the stall under a thatched roof. This is why the humble stall gives Dayamani and her husband, Nelson, a sense of pride. Ask her about her worldly assets and Dayamani often replies with a smile, saying that her assets run into millions. She says that the millions of people in Jharkhand are her most prized asset and the “people who struggle with me are my insurance!”

Dayamani was born into a Munda tribal family in Arhara village in Gumla district of Jharkhand state. Early on, she saw her ancestral home being snatched by a money lender who used bribes and threats to take it away. Although her parents, Jura Barla (father) and Hysia Barla (mother), were illiterate, they went to court in the hope of getting back their land. This was to

no avail, as no witnesses turned up in court for fear of the *diku* (a local term which means both outsider and exploiter). The family thus lost their ancestral land and they were forced into bonded agricultural labor on their own land.

Unable to eke out a living, Dayamani and her mother migrated to Ranchi in search of a livelihood. At the age of nine, determined to continue her schooling, she worked as a domestic help at P. P. Compound. Here, she cleaned and cooked for a group of Punjabi businessmen everyday for a salary of Rs 20/- (\$0.3) and two leftover meals. Dayamani recounts that the men often tried to assault her during her work there.

She does not remember her childhood nor can she can recount her school days except that she was unable to pay her school fees on time. Dayamani never celebrated her birthday as she did not know her exact date of birth. When she had to fill out an examination form in 10th grade, her teacher put in a tentative date (11.12.1964). She studied in private schools while shifting from one place to another. The school authorities never troubled her for the fees, knowing that both daughter and mother were working hard to support her education and the family back home. However, on the advice of her teacher, Dayamani applied for a fee exemption and got it for a year or two. She obtained her Intermediate and Bachelor's Degree in Commerce from the Gossner College, Ranchi, one of the premier institutes in the state.

In Ranchi, Dayamani tutored school children and did typing work for which she was paid Rs 1/- (\$0.015) per hour. While the family was still struggling to settle down, her mother developed tuberculosis. This illness resulted in substantial costs for the family, so she started a small tea stall. Fortunately, her mother recovered after receiving treatment. By this time, Dayamani had completed her Master's in

Commerce from Ranchi University.

Activism and the Koel Karo Movement

During the course of her studies and work, Dayamani met many liberal thinkers and social activists. When she was nearing the end of her Master's degree, she started closely following the KoelKaro dam project, which was to displace 250,000 people and destroy 55,000 hectares of agricultural land and 27,000 acres of forest in the area. "All these people will lose their homes, land and forests," she thought.

In the 1950s, a hydro-electricity power project was first conceptualized by the Bihar State Electricity Board. It aimed to generate 710 MW of electricity by constructing two dams at an estimated cost of 157 crores (1.5 billion rupees).¹ Of the two dams, one was a 55-meter high dam on the northern side of the Karo River and the second was a 44-meter high dam at the southern end of the Koel River. The real cost of the project was far more than any project report could budget for as it was paid by the soon-to-be displaced Munda tribal community. The 1973 project report estimated that 125 villages would be affected. This was contested by the locals who stated that the number was actually 256. Also at stake were approximately 152 *sarnas* (sites for ritual festivities) and 300 *sasandris* (cremation grounds which act as memorials to their ancestors).

The struggle against displacement was led by a number of tribal and non-tribal leaders. Although Dayamani was from a neighboring village, the people of the region were so affectionate that their inspiration led her to stay and fight with them. Finally, she joined the movement under the banner of *Koel Karo Jan Sangathan* (KKJS-KoelKaro People's Organization) in 1990.

Around this time, deaths due to drowning at the Kutku dam and the lack of proper rehabilitation for those displaced by the

construction of the Subarnarekha dam (Jharkhand) opened the Munda community's eyes to the dangers that were looming. Extensive mobilization in the following years led to the work being stopped in 1979 until the issues could be resolved. The following year, responsibility for the project passed from the Bihar State Electricity Board to the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation, causing a setback in the negotiations.

In August 1984, the Supreme Court ruled against the use of force to acquire land. The Government of Bihar then offered to build two 'model villages' for the Mundas to encourage them to relocate. The KKJS retorted that it would first be essential to relocate the *sasandiris*. The two 'model villages' were never built, and things came to a standstill for the next decade.²

In 1995, the then Prime Minister, P.V. Narsimha Rao, declared his intention to lay the foundation stone of the Koel Karo project. The Mundas resisted this by astonishingly simple and effective means:- nearly 25,000 people lay down on the roads, blocking access.

In December 2000, the state of Jharkhand was separated from Bihar. Just two months later, on 2 February 2001, the police opened fire (unofficial estimates say 150 rounds) on a peaceful crowd at Tapkara village, killing eight of Dayamani's colleagues and injuring more than 30. But the protesting crowd did not stop and marched forward with the slogan "जान देंगे, पर ज़मीन नहीं देंगे" (We will give our lives but not our land). Dayamani realized the power of truth from the Koel Karo Mass Movement. Several times she received death threats from corporate heavyweights who warned her against organizing her community. But whole villages united and turned against the company and they were willing to die in their fields rather than become landless.

After over a decade-long people's resistance, the project was eventually scrapped in August 2003 and the Koel Karo project

became history on 21 July 2010. Koel Karo is today one of the very rare instances in India and in the world where tribals have successfully persuaded the government to shelve a sanctioned project.

Her pen became a sword

Being in the Koel Karo and Netrahat Movement (a protest in March 1994 against the construction of a proposed field firing range which would have displaced nearly three lakh (0.3 million) of people from 245 villages, and acquired 3,606 square km of land. Dayamani closely followed the media coverage. During the army firing exercise in Netrahat (a popular hill station in Jharkhand), many villagers lost their lives, young girls and women were raped, and the police threatened people and refused to accept their complaints.

The media regularly reported on protest activities but did not sufficiently cover the in-depth issues as to why adivasis were protesting. Dayamani considered this not as a mere land issue but as a threat to the existence of the adivasi's language, culture, identity and survival. During this time, she met senior journalists and activists such as Faisal Anurag, Vasavi Kiro and others who inspired her to take up the pen and write the history of her own people. Inspired by Faisal Anurag, Dayamani and a few of her friends started a monthly magazine called '*Jan Haaq*' (Peoples' Rights) in 1996, after acquiring a bank loan of Rs 25,000 (nearly \$ 370). They went from village to village and wrote on rural issues. Due to her regular visits, people in the villages began to hope that she would take up their issues with the government and fight for their rights.

Initially, no one considered her a journalist until she received the Counter Media Award for Rural Journalism in 2000. This award is funded by royalties from eminent journalist P. Sainath's Magsaysay's award-winning book *Everybody Loves a*

Good Drought, and is meant for rural journalists whose outstanding work often gets ignored or even appropriated by the wider press at state or national level in India. Once she had received the award, Dayamani saw a dramatic change in attitudes. Every news story she wrote was published by a number of newspapers. The award brought her into the limelight and she accepted it as an honor to the people and the community. Eventually, *Prabhat Khabar*, a leading regional daily, welcomed her onboard and she worked there for the next ten years. She remained in media for the next 15 years. She has also authored a number of books and continues to write.

Being the Iron Lady

Jharkhand is spread over a 79,714 km² (30,778 sq miles) area which accounts for 40 percent of the mineral-filled forests of India. Dayamani and her colleagues argue that, within ten years of the formation of Jharkhand, the government had signed a Memorandum of Understanding with more than 100 companies. If all these companies were allotted land, not an inch of land would be left for the farmers and the adivasis, who rely heavily on agriculture and forest produce. People have witnessed massive land grabbing due to industrialization, and pollution of land, water and environment in the northern Jharkhand districts. Jamshedpur or Tata Nagar, a populous and primarily industrial zone known for its steel industry, has been established at the cost of 64 villages and thousands of displaced people who were never compensated.

In this, Dayamani's fight against the world's biggest steel maker, Arcelor Mittal, was being waged from her tiny tea stall. Under the banner of the Adivasi Moolwasi Asthitwa Rakcha Manch (Platform for the Protection of Indigenous Adivasi People Identity/Existence), Dayamani led a massive campaign to stop Arcelor Mittal from plundering the rich natural resources via a proposed steel plant, a \$8.79 billion planned

investment, which would have seized 12,000 acres (49 sq km) of land and displaced 70,000 people from 40 villages, while also harming ecosystems.

लोहा नहीं, अनाज चाहिए ! “We want grain, not iron” was the cry of the communities.

Even though the company was willing to negotiate with rights holders, people countered that the subsistence of tribal communities was impossible without their habitat, language, culture, identity and history, which is closely associated with Mother Nature. Dayamani was repeatedly harassed and threatened at gun point by company goons for mobilizing the people. Once she said,

“If at the cost of one's life, people, the land and forests of Jharkhand could be saved, hit me with as many as bullets as my body can hold, I am ready to lay down my life”.

From 2005 to 2009, Dayamani sustained the mass movement against Arcelor Mittal, until both the company and the government accepted the defeat.

The Nagri Movement

From 2010 onwards, Dayamani led a campaign against the Jharkhand government's move to acquire 227 acres of fertile farmland to set up campuses for the Indian Institutes of Management (IIM), the Indian Institutes of Information Technology (IIT) and the National University of Study and Research in Law (NUSRL), which would displace 600 tribal families from Nagri village near Ranchi. After failing to acquire land in the late 1950s because of resistance from the people, the government again tried to acquire the land in 2011-12. The government claimed that they had acquired the land in 1955 and had even offered compensation. They went on to assert that a few farmers had accepted the compensation while

others refused it. The farmers, who had been cultivating the lands for decades, produced documents that showed they had been paying land tax regularly up to 2012, thus calling the government's bluff.

The villagers welcomed the government's decision to establish the campuses but not on cultivable fertile land, which is the only source of livelihood for the inhabitants of Nagri. They took the matter to the High Court and the Supreme Court but, unfortunately, the verdict went against them. In January 2012, a boundary wall was constructed via the deployment of the Rapid Action Force (RAF). When the villagers protested, the police brutally attacked them. Dozens of false criminal cases were established against four leaders, including women. During a *dharna* or sit-in protest, three women died of sun stroke. The peaceful Nagri struggle was suppressed by the administration.

Dayamani was imprisoned on different charges. On 19 October 2012, she was arrested for blocking the road during a demonstration in Angara Block six years back while demanding job cards for the poor under the much-celebrated Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA). After nine days in jail, she was granted bail but, a few hours later, she was charged with a new case for her involvement in the Nagri struggle. It was clearly a plot to weaken the Nagri Peoples' Movement. By the time she came out of jail, the Nagri movement had already declined for lack of proper leadership.

Even though she was charged in 14 different cases, Dayamani's determination and dedication never diminished. She continues to attend court hearings and fight against corruption and injustice. Her fight goes on, not only against displacement but for the protection of the indigenous way of life, their history, language, culture, human values and environment.

Entry into politics

In the course of her activism, Dayamani realized that street plays, road shows and protests alone would not protect the *jal-jangal-jamin* (water-forest-land). These activities could only influence the people. She therefore decided to enter politics, where lawmakers pass laws and policies without understanding or caring about the realities and the needs of the people. By becoming a political leader, she wanted to change all this.

Dayamani had received remarkable support while in jail. She realized that it was because of her work and she wanted to work for the poor who had supported her through it all. To fight for them, she needed an effective political platform. Even though most of the political parties except the BJP had approached her, she finally contested her first Lok Sabha (Parliamentary) Election in 2014 on the Aam Aadmi Party's ticket in the Khunti constituency. Unfortunately, she lost the election by 12,000 votes to her BJP opponent Kadia Munda (sitting MLA and former Speaker of the Rajya Sabha), who has been a parliamentarian for the past 35 years. However, Dayamani did not consider this a loss. She eventually realized that electoral politics is a game of money, muscle and might.

She pointed out that those who had never deceived the motherland and had an infallible ideology had never won an election in Jharkand. She understood that it was impossible to be successful in politics without selling yourself short. On the other hand, she witnessed non-political people who were willing to lay down their lives for the truth - people who were truly worried about losing their lands and forests. These people never backed down even when threatened by goons. A 70-year-old male supporter who was beaten up said,

“You are threatening me because I campaign for Dayamani, but I want to tell you that I have lived my life and am standing for

the truth. I am ready to be killed and be martyred for the truth rather than just dying of old age. You can shoot me down.”

During her campaign, people stood by her and wholeheartedly campaigned for her. She fondly remembers how school and college students bunked classes to join the campaign. Villagers gracefully donated grains, vegetables and firewood and contributed nearly eight lakh (0.8 million) in donations to meet campaign expenses. Every day, the youth would get together and cook for 30-40 people.

Dayamani took this as a victory of the people. She dedicated it to those who did not sell their votes for money, material and liquor, who wanted to live with her heads held high, through their own resources and to nurture leadership and create leaders. Dayamani is confident about the upcoming generation of leaders. She firmly believes that they will lead the country by steering away from traditional politics. She continues to work for the Aam Aadmi Party as the State Coordinator for Jharkhand and travels around the country to lend a helping hand in the party's campaigns.

Dayamani's leadership and work reflect her compassion and dedication to promoting and safeguarding human rights. She is an example of a selfless and courageous woman who powerfully demonstrates how indigenous women play a crucial role in safeguarding the rights of their communities.

Dayamani's difficult life is the reality of many women on this planet. The only difference is that she has fought back for her life and for thousands of others. She has pushed for a better society and for a better world. She will remain a hero to liberal thinkers and the “Voice of the Voiceless” to millions, not just from Jharkhand and India but those who are oppressed across the globe.

Dayamani Barla's letter from Birsa Munda jail
(English translation)

I have never deceived my homeland. I never overlooked the questions raised by the Jharkand people. The flowing water of the Koel, Karo and Chata rivers is a witness to this. I learnt to write with my fingers in the mud and sand of this land. On the banks of the river Karo, while grazing my sheep, I learnt to bathe and swim. The shade of grass and trees covered with dew filled in the sky, gave me love; how can I sell this?

How could I not make the pain and suffering of the society, which taught me how to live, a part of myself? To protect the interests and rights of these people is our (everyone's) responsibility. And I think this is the only way for the people who try to fulfill this responsibility. Only dangers and troubles are written in their fate, this is the reality of life. I tried to tell the government that their system is not fulfilling its responsibility towards its citizens.

When the villagers of Anagda Block went on a rally demanding job cards under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), which was started to prevent the migration of people from rural areas by providing them work for 100 days, a case was lodged against them. Many of my friends were present in that rally. The MGNREGA scam is clear to everyone. The truth is that the poor rural people did not get anything but they were declared as culprits.

Then I was put in jail. Violating the laws of the land, the government was forcefully acquiring 227 acres of agricultural land from the villagers of Nagri. I tried to tell the government that they were doing a wrong thing. On the basis of law and human values, I asked them to leave the agricultural land alone. You are welcome to build the Law College and IIM on an

infertile and unproductive land, I said. My crime was this, because of which four of my people were already behind bars, many lost their lands and today I am behind bars. Today, looters of the state have become well-wishers in the sight of the government and its institutions. On one hand, the exploiters of the state's resources and human rights violators are being given protection by the government, and on the other the sons and daughters who are the well-wishers of the land are being declared criminals. Every well-wisher of the country is being treated in the same manner as Birsa Munda, who was termed as a criminal when he fought for the people.

What is right and what is wrong I am not able to understand. But I know this much that I have turned into a stone today. The whole world is sleeping. It is 10'clock at night and the captives are sleeping in the women's ward of Birsa Munda Central Jail. I am sitting alone. I have never retreated from the pain and suffering of others, whether it be day or night. Even the darkness of the night could not stop me from wiping the tears of others, but today my legs have been tied. Every hand which used to wipe another's tear has been chained. My sister-in-law's dead body is lying in my house, my family is engulfed with fear and I am lying in the jail both helpless and speechless. I cannot shed tears even though I have tearful eyes. Today, on 6 November 2012, I have to go to the court. I have a feeling that a new case will be lodged against me, for which I will be taken into custody or be remanded or a warrant will be issued against me. I am losing trust in trust itself.

I thank all my friends, near and dear, who have extended their support to me at this time of sorrow. All my jail inmates are persuading me to fight this battle from outside the walls of this jail. I will try my best to be as steadfast as the mountains, rivers and forests which stand firm in the villages and towns,

elevating the voice of this struggle. We will not give even an inch of our ancestral land. We hope that this moment will not be the end of our lives because as long as the streams of Koel, Karo and Chata continue to flow, we will fight this battle.

Your Sister,

Dayamani Barla

6 November 2012, Birsa Munda Central Jail, Ranchi, Jharkhand
(*This letter was written to Faisal Anurag and was first published in the Hindi Newspaper Prabhat Khabar.*)

Footnotes:

1. *India's Dayamani Barla Selected for Cultural Survival's Ellen L. Lutz Indigenous Rights Award*, available at <http://www.culturalsurvival.org/news/indias-dayamani-barla-selected-cultural-survivals-ellen-l-lutz-indigenous-rights-award>
2. Celebrating the story of Koel Karo resistance: KKJS gets Bhagirath Prayas Samman at first Indie Rivers Week available at <https://sandrp.wordpress.com/2014/11/24/celebrating-the-story-of-koel-karo-resistance-kkjs-gets-bhagirath-prayas-samman-at-first-india-rivers-week/>

[This story is based on personal interaction and interview with Dayamani Barla supplemented with media reports and related documents]

PROLOGUE

The Adivasis of Kerala

Kerala is one of India's most progressive states in terms of social welfare and quality of life. With a literacy rate of 94.65% (2011 Census), the literacy rate for women in Kerala is one of the highest in all of Asia. Peaceful and pristine, India's cleanest state, better known as "God's own country" as described by the Kerala Tourism Board, has also been named one of the ten "Paradises of the World" by the National Geographic Traveler.¹

Most of the tribal people of Kerala live in the forests of the Western Ghats, a range of mountains that borders Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. The 2011 Census report records the tribal population in the state as being 484,839 (1.4 percent of the total population of 3.34 crore (33.4 million), with the decadal growth rate standing at 0.36 percent. 433,092 tribals live in rural and 51,747 live in urban areas.² Wayanad district has the highest concentration of tribals in Kerala.

As per the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Orders (Amendment) Act. 2002, there are 36 tribal communities across Kerala.³ The Paniya tribe is the largest indigenous group, followed by the Kurichiyans, Kanikarans, Muthuvans,

Malaiarayangans, Kurumangans and Irulas. Each of these communities is distinct from each other in culture and language. They have developed their own herbal medicines over the years and have a rich legacy in arts.

The Kurichiyangans were warriors, skilled in archery and martial arts. They served the king, Pazhasshi Raja of Kottayam, and during his fight against the British they defeated them many times.

However, a major turning point came when Wayanad district (which has the highest tribal population of Kerala) was annexed by the British Empire in 1799. The British opened up the plateau for the cultivation of tea, coffee and other cash crops. Roads were laid across the dangerous slopes of Wayanad from Calicut and Telicherry and were extended to the city of Mysore (Karnataka) and to Ooty (Tamil Nadu). The opening of roads brought people from all over and, soon, between 1860 and 1889, the original tribal inhabitants lost their traditional forests and land.

The slave trade was common during this period. The British brought laborers from Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Burma, Mauritius and Nepal and from the Madras Presidency to Malabar, where there was a shortage of laborers for the plantations. Murdock Brown, the Overseer and Manager of the Anjarakkandy Plantation, used his political and judicial authority to maintain an army of bonded laborers on his plantations. He sourced entire families, in large numbers, and employed women and children without paying adequate wages.⁴ The Paniyans were bought and sold, along with the land, as slave laborers. They were known as people suited to hard agricultural work in the humid climate and malaria-ridden conditions of Wayanad.⁵

Since then, the tribal communities have been historically

marginalized and oppressed by various factors and forces. After Independence, large-scale alienation of tribal lands took place. The Kerala Land Reforms Act 1963, with its 'land to the tiller' policy, turned out to be a nightmare for the adivasis. Under the new law, the occupiers of the land (settler farmers) became the owners and the original owners (the adivasis) became landless and were reduced to the status of agricultural laborers.

The eviction of adivasis from the forest region due to development policies such as land reforms, the demarcation of wildlife sanctuaries and forest reserves, construction of roads and dams, development of tourism and tribal resettlement in colonies has worsened their situation. Their customary rights over land and natural forests, and cultural identity and traditional knowledge, have been under continuous threat.

According to a survey conducted in 1982, 64% of the Adivasi farmland in Kerala had by then come under the control of others, and the (Kerala) government had failed to recover their lost land rights. The loss of land to others, the waning of the indigenous farming methods and the desertification of the area (making the land barren by controlling the irrigation and other systems) pushed adivasis to depend on the Public Distribution System for survival. Healthcare services have been completely neglected, resulting in child malnutrition and maternal deaths. The statistics from Attapadi district, with nearly 88 tribal hamlets, show 47 infant deaths in 2013, 22 infant and 37 unborn infant deaths in 2014, and nine so far in 2015.⁶

When, for the first time in Kerala's long history of adivasi oppression, a voice has been raised, it has invariably been that of one adivasi woman, C.K. Janu.

Endnotes:

1. Kerala: A vacation in paradise, *The Times of India*, 7 February 2014 available at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/Kerala-A-vacation-in-paradise/articleshow/26251595.cms>
2. Study Reveals dip in some tribal population, *The New Indian Express*, 23 June 2013, available at <http://www.newindianexpress.com/states/kerala/Study-reveals-dip-in-some-tribal-populations/2013/06/23/article1648601.ece>
3. As Amended by The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Orders (Amendment) Act. 2002 (Act.10 Of 2003) vide para - VII- Kerala - Second Schedule notified in the Gazette of India, dt. 8.1.2003). As such there are only 36 communities in the list. (Kotta, Kammara, Konda Reddies, Konda Kapus and Maratti were the communities excluded. Palliyan and Palliyar are the communities clubbed with Paliyan).
4. A. Aiyappan, *Report on the Socio-Economic Conditions of the Agricultural Tribes of the Province of Madras*, Government of Madras (1948), p. 93.
5. Nithya N. R., Globalization and the Plight of Tribals: The Case of Kerala, India. *The Dawn Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 1, January-June 2014, p. 743, available at www.thedawnjournal.com
6. From the Cradle. *The Hindu*, 19 July 2015

[6]

C. K. JANU AND THE PROMISED LAND

[1966-]



"Experience is my guide"

Chekot Karian Janu, known as the “Organic Tribal Leader” of Kerala, has carved out a niche for herself in the history of the adivasi people's movement. She spearheads a social struggle that has seen the participation of over half a million adivasis from Kerala and has garnered national and international attention.

In 1966, C. K. Janu was born into an Adiyar family in Thrissilery Chekot Colony, a tribal hamlet in Wayanad district. Her parents were farm laborers who toiled from dawn to dusk everyday to eke out a living. She did not receive any formal education. Life itself was her teacher.

Influenced by socialist ideology from a young age, Janu became the political voice of her community and today she is regarded as a leading socio-political activist. She has attended United

Nations conferences and delivered speeches in many countries. As part of a delegation of the Peoples' Global Action Network (a global network of grassroots groups, social movements and trade unions), C.K. Janu toured Europe and took part in protest demonstrations against globalization in 1999.

Janu and her Mother Forest

As the oldest of five children, Janu did not receive any formal schooling. However, Mother Nature, being the greatest teacher, was wide open to her in order to teach her the circle of life. While grazing the landlord's cattle and wandering around the forest, she learnt to quench her thirst with stream water and satiate her hunger with wild berries, roots and twigs. Occasionally, she slept on rocky mountains or simply sat idly by a waterfall. She learnt the use of medicinal herbs, and grew up talking with the trees.

Her people lived in a community. They did not have any electricity in their huts. At nightfall, they simply built fires from the logs in their yard and sat around them together. Children caught fish and crabs from streams or from the lush paddy fields, and they cooked and ate together.

By clearing overgrown shrubs, they grew *chama* and *thina* (small millet), tapioca, ginger, turmeric, plantains, yams and other vegetables. To keep monkeys and wild animals away, they built small huts or a platform on huge trees. Sitting on top of the trees, they could see a green paradise nestled among the mountains, rivers and the wide blue sky, and they could see rain approaching, and elephants or other animals coming from afar. They would chase away the birds and animals to prevent them from damaging the crops by beating the *chini* (drum). If elephants attacked them, they would run downhill instead of up as elephants cannot run downhill.

They rarely saw people other than those from their own community and their landlords. Janu said, "If any outsiders came, we ran and hid in the forest. The forest is like a mother to us, the forest does not go anywhere."

Marykutty, a school teacher from the nearby town of Vellamunda wanted someone to help out with the care of her child and Janu's mother thought the young girl was suited to the job. When Janu was around six or seven, her mother took her to Vellamunda. On the way, Janu saw a place other than the forest and the farmland for the first time. She saw houses that were lit up. Janu liked the child as she was beautiful. She sang songs she had learnt from the village women to send the child to sleep.

During a school vacation, Janu went to Marykutty's native place at Athirampuzha. Janu traveled by bus and went to a church for the first time. She also went to a cinema to watch the film "Chembarathy". At the cinema, she saw a girl in a dotted skirt singing and dancing. The cinema hall was dark, but not like the forest.

She took care of the child for two or three years. When Marykutty was transferred to another place, Janu's mother brought her back to Chekot. Back in the village, Janu worked in the landlord's field. She does not remember if she was paid daily wages or if it was taken by her parents.

When she was around 17, she learnt to write and read by participating in the "Shaksharatha" literacy mission run by the State Government. The villagers studied in the evenings on returning from the fields. Janu loved learning but she only managed to pick up a few letters of the alphabet as the teacher stopped coming after a few months. Janu continued to learn by following the pictures and letters in her brother's books. She tried to read scraps of newspapers collected from shops and

then began reading the *Manorama* weekly, a leading newspaper. Later, she herself started teaching her people as part of the literacy mission.

Political beginnings

As her literacy skills improved, Janu joined the Kerala State Karshaka Thozilali –a peasant union, supported by the Communist Party of India (Marxist). She campaigned for them and was soon involved in the fight for an increase in wages. Janu worked as an informer, and her people would follow her even if the strikes affected their livelihood. Slowly, she began to understand the political nexus between the union and the landlords. She found that her people were rarely treated with respect, and strikes were settled by those in power through compromises that did not address their issues or demands.

Once, at a party meeting in Wayanad, she realized that the issue of farm laborers and their living conditions was never part of the agenda. Party leaders had only called on her and her people so that they could come and add to the numbers. They were only roped in so that they could shout slogans, sit in on strikes and ask for votes. Party workers would often even misbehave with the women.

Janu understood that the party stood for power and money. It was clear that she could do nothing honestly for her people by working within the party. Instead, she preferred to take small but effective actions for her community on her own.

She identified the multifarious problems of the adivasis that had persisted over generations. She began to visit tribal hamlets to understand their problems, to learn fresh lessons from them and to mobilize them for campaigns. Other than land encroachment, she also noticed the rise of social inequity in the community. Alcoholism, domestic violence and sexual exploitation of women were all commonplace.

Land alienation and life in the colony

The influx of settlers coupled with unfavorable government policies from the colonial period completely absorbed the little land the adivasis' ancestors had prepared by clearing forest. During the 1960s, when Muthanga was declared a Wildlife Sanctuary, and again in the 1980s when eucalyptus plantations were established, tribal families were evicted from their living areas. The introduction of Kerala Land Reform Bills in 1960, 1963, 1964 and the Tenancy Reforms Act (1970), specifically meant to provide land to the landless, benefitted only a few as the majority of the families were allotted three cents (about 435 square feet) of land in “colonies” designed for their resettlement.¹

Even with the introduction of the “One lakh Housing Scheme” for the poor, many people were still excluded. The adivasis, who had once lived freely in the forest, were confined to government colonies. Soon, tensions, conflicts, aggressiveness, suicides, malnutrition and diseases started to occur in the fractured communities. This also led to deprivation and starvation.

Over the decades, settlers have addicted the adivasi men to alcohol, dispossessed them of their lands and sexually abused their women. Adivasis, once a majority in the hilly Wayanad region, have shrunk to a minority. The loss of land and the resettlement into colonies has created difficulties among the adivasis and they have had a hard time accepting their new way of life. They used to cultivate minor crops but now they buy everything from the shops. People find themselves without money, land and work. Between 1999 and 2001, 147 deaths from starvation were reported among the adivasi communities of the state.²

Sexual exploitation and miseries of unwed mothers

The treatment of women and girls has become another grave concern. In the adivasi community, marriages have always been conducted in a simple fashion. The bride would simply be taken away from her home by the groom and his family members. There was no formal or legal arrangement. Once daily survival became such an uphill task, many women fell into the lure of promised marriages. Often these marriages, many a time promised by landlords and men affiliated with political parties, never materialized. Many children were born out of wedlock. Unwed mothers were left to fend for themselves and their children. “Those who came amidst our people with ideas of upliftment and programs exploited our people,” says Janu.³

In the 1970s, many of the police officers who were deployed to check Naxalite activity in Wayanad and Thirunelly took advantage of adivasi women. As per the *Tehelka* magazine report (2011), Wayanad is home to 2,000 unwed mothers who eke out a perilous existence in the shadow of disgrace. There are sexually abused and abandoned women in tribal hamlets all over Kerala but this district, with its 17.1% tribal population, has the greatest number⁴, many of whom are as young as 11. Probes by the Crime Branch have revealed that, of the tribal unwed mothers, around 200 are juveniles.⁵ Most of them are victims of seduction or one-night stands. Tribal girls recruited as casual laborers in tea and coffee estates are sexually abused by landlords and fellow workers. Once they fall pregnant, they are left in despair. Many of these women are forced into prostitution for survival. Premature deaths of tribal women, mostly on an abortionist's table, are frequent.

Given these circumstances, Janu once declared self-rule to protect the interests of the adivasi communities and barricaded a 188-acre stretch of reserve forest at Panavalli. She put up a signboard declaring “self-rule” and prohibiting

the entry of non-tribals into the area. However, the forest officials took away the board when she was away attending a conference.

Birth of the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha (AGMS)

In the early 1980s, a number of civil society organizations and political parties emerged for the protection of adivasi interests although they mostly addressed the land problem without properly understanding the various dimensions of the issue. In 1992, the first National Adivasi Sangamam (Convention), which took place in Mananthavady near Wayanad, became a turning point in adivasi development. For the first time, tribals from the whole of South India expressed their development aspirations, asserted their cultural identity as distinct, dignified people of the national polity, and set their political agenda for future endeavors.⁶ Janu became the President of the South Zone Adivasi Forum and facilitated many tribal organizations in South India.

On 26 January 1994, a public meeting was held in Kalpetta to organize a demonstration over the government's refusal to act on land allocation, despite prevailing laws and relevant High Court orders. A non-responsive attitude combined with oppressive actions by the government pushed the adivasis to adopt more aggressive strategies such as hunger strikes and forcible occupations.⁷

Many adivasi families occupied land and built huts in Ambukuthi in Wayanad but these were destroyed by the police and the Forest Department. Many were arrested. Janu and some women started a hunger strike and demanded: i) the immediate restoration of alienated lands to the adivasis; ii) the allocation of one to five acres of land each to all landless adivasi families; iii) the issuing of title deeds for the Ambukuthi land to landless adivasi families under the Vested Forest Act;

iv) the handover of all development programs for adivasis to adivasis; v) the public declaration of all financial details for adivasi development projects forthwith; vi) an immediate end to atrocities against adivasis.⁸

After five days of strike, the police threatened them with criminal prosecution for attempted suicide. The strike was withdrawn with the promise of the District Collector that the issue would be solved within one month. While the struggle was underway, in 1994, the Chief Minister proposed amending the Kerala Scheduled Tribes (Restriction of Transfer of Land and Restoration of Alienated Land), or KST, Act 1975. However, the Revenue Minister affirmed that no settlers would be evicted which, in practice, meant that the adivasis could not get their land back.⁹

This led to the Cheengeri struggle. On March 1995, nearly 76 adivasi families occupied 18 acres of vested forest lands in Panavally, Thirunelli Panchayat, and started farming. The Forest Department immediately retaliated and burnt down all the huts, arresting the 102 occupants. Of these, 26 were children aged between six months and five years, who were sent to a remand home for 15 days.¹⁰ Meanwhile many starvation death cases were reported in the region. Angered, the tribals began to blame their administration for their plight.

Finding the political-administrative authorities insensitive, tribal leaders worked out new strategies and methods of protest. A historical land demonstration was started with the slogan “give us land so that we may live”. Adivasi organizations and leaders representing 34 tribal communities of the state formed the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha (AGMS) on 3 October 2001 in the capital Thiruvananthapuram. They held a 48-day protest by pitching 1,000 tents opposite the Kerala State Secretariat and asking the state to return their land. C. K. Janu declared a fast to the death.

Facing the possibility of widespread criticism and loss of support, the government decided to initiate talks with the leaders.¹¹ The then Chief Minister, A. K. Antony, came to an agreement that the government would provide rice for six months and also promised to distribute land, enforce the KST Land Act and implement the 10th Five Year Plan. However, the people demanded the immediate return of their land as they needed it for cultivation and survival.

Soon after the 2001 protest, the State Government prepared a master plan and estimated that there were around 52,000 landless adivasi families in the state. Since the state lacked adequate cultivable land, it asked the permission of the Central Government (NDA Govt.) to distribute 12,000 ha of forest land. However, nothing substantial materialized over the next year except for the distribution of land to some adivasis under the Tribal Mission Package. The government's promises were not realized and the AGMS was instigated to begin another historic struggle in Muthunga.

The Muthanga Protest for Survival 2003

To claim their right to the forests, adivasis from different parts of Wayanad entered the Muthunga forest in early January 2003. They occupied the part where eucalyptus plantations had been established and erected huts in the barren lands of Thakarappady, Ambukuthi and Ponkuzhi. A minimum program of “self-rule” was drawn up in the spirit of the Panchayati Raj system of local self-government. The adivasis built schools for their children and erected check-posts to control the entry of outsiders. They also started farming. Of the nearly 4,000 people, 300 were children.¹²

No authorities got in touch with the leaders of the AGMS to talk for nearly 42 days, leading the people to believe they would be left alone. Suddenly, on 17 February 2003, forest officials and

other miscreants set fire to three different places within the occupied area. Nearly 80 huts were completely destroyed and more than 1,000 acres of the plantation were burnt down. Some of the vandals were caught by adivasis and handed over to the District Collector, while AGMS activists called for swift action.

During the early morning of 19 February, heavily armed police and forest officials entered the forest land for eviction operation. Without any proper notice or attempt to arrest the people peacefully, they bombarded the settlement with teargas shells and even opened fire on them while others set fire to the huts. As the adivasis tried to defend themselves, armed policemen shot at them. The AGMS leaders demanded the firing stop so that those injured could be taken to hospital. Nothing was done and the violent eviction continued for hours.¹³

Eviction operation claimed several lives and left many injured. An adivasi named Jogi died at the scene, while one policeman died on the way to hospital. Everything they owned was burnt down. The police later reported that the tribals had captured one forest official and one policeman, and that the latter had died from injuries inflicted by his captors. On 24 February 2003, when social activist A. Vasu spoke to Janu and M. Geethanandan (an activist) in Calicut District Jail, he quoted the leaders of the protest as having said that nearly 15 people had been fatally wounded in the course of the police firing.¹⁴ Once this information became public, the government issued a statement reporting that the death toll was five.¹⁵ Human rights activists, however, claimed that up to 20 adivasis had been killed when the police opened fire.¹⁶

Violence by the police and miscreants continued for days in and around Muthanga, Wayanad and elsewhere. In several districts, innocent adivasis who had fled the scene were picked

up by the police from the streets and their settlements. Hundreds were arrested and charged with a number of crimes, including murder. More than 300 adivasis and 40 children were held in illegal custody in a Forest Department bungalow (government rest house) and tortured.¹⁷ C.K. Janu and Geethanandan were also arrested, tortured and jailed for 40 days. In her late 30s at the time, Janu was beaten up but not given any medical care. Hundreds were driven into the forest for days. Several adivasis had to flee to nearby states. A nine-month-old infant died and three others (Gopalan, Nhenan and Veruvan) died later as a result of custodial torture.¹⁸

After her release on bail, C.K. Janu told the media, “The right to live on the land of birth is a fundamental right of every adivasi. The Muthanga incidents have strengthened our conviction that the adivasis have no other option but to wage a relentless struggle for gaining land rights.”¹⁹

In response to the land struggle and the consequent police action in Muthanga, there were strong reactions from democratic institutions and civil society. Following a visit to Muthanga, the renowned writer and activist, Arundhati Roy, wrote a letter to the Chief Minister stating, “You have blood on your hands, sir. You need to make amends. And quickly!”²⁰

The National Commission on Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes, the National Commission for Women, the Union Minister for Tribal Affairs, Juel Oraon, and many political leaders visited the place. The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) was entrusted with the investigation as instructed by the National Human Rights Commission. Later, in its report submitted to the High Court, the CBI said that the violent and inconsiderate behavior of the adivasis, who did not respect the law of the land, had necessitated the use of firearms by the police. Hence, the use of force and gunfire by the police at Muthanga on 19 February 2003 was clearly necessary and was

fully justified and lawful.²¹ The CBI also denied any instance of police harassment in the cases of Janu and Geethanandan.

Post-Muthanga scenario

The failure to restore land to adivasis continued to be a major problem in the post-Muthanga period. The State Government formulated the Tribal Rehabilitation and Development Mission. In 2004, the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests gave permission to distribute 7,840 ha of waste forests to adivasis. The mission's work did not yield much fruit, however.

In 2014, the Kerala government claimed that most of the demands had been met. More than 9,000 acres of land had already been provided to 6,887 families, but the AGMS leaders said that the number of landless tribal families had grown to some 75,000, up from 35,000 since the 2001 protest. Many families are still without land. The rehabilitated areas lack basic amenities such as drinking water, electricity, healthcare services and other infrastructure. Land distributed to them lies abandoned, encroached by others and also taken by the government itself for public work. In many areas, the government has not sanctioned the promised funds to develop land for agriculture, as they were deemed uncultivable. The tribals in Kerala therefore continue to live miserably in colonies with rising social vices, and frequent quarrels which have destroyed normal life. Wayand district alone has had nearly 500 cases of death and suicide among the tribals.²²

***Nilpu Samaram* (Standing Vigil) 2014**

To claim the amenities promised by the government under the leadership of C. K. Janu, AGMS once again held a *Nilpu Samaram* or a Standing Vigil in front of the State Secretariat for nearly six months (163 days, 9 July-18 December 2014).

People from far away villages joined the protest and stood for

nearly 11 hours at a stretch, everyday. This time, they were joined by large numbers of the general public, including artisans, film personalities, activists and students from across the state.

The protest ended on 18 December 2014 when Chief Minister Oommen Chandy said that landless families would immediately be allocated more than 19,000 acres of land for their rehabilitation. He also made a number of other promises. The PESA Act would be implemented in Edamalakudy and Aralam panchayats, which have mostly tribal population. Tribal land would be protected from alienation and 447 families evicted from Muthanga would be rehabilitated. Legal aid would be provided to those who had faced prosecution in the Muthanga protest and unsubstantiated cases would be withdrawn. The government also promised that it would not force the farmers into pineapple cultivation as elephants tended to destroy these crops, and that traditional agriculture would be promoted in tribal hamlets. A special package would also be implemented for vulnerable groups.

However, Janu is largely unconvinced by the government's latest undertakings. She will continue to fight for her people's return to the "Promised Land". Now in her late 50s and unmarried, Janu has devoted her whole life to the service of her people. She says, "My personal hardships have no relevance as they are part of a cause that highlighted the collective dispossession and deprivation of the hapless adivasis."²³

Endnotes:

1. Challenges before Kerala's Landless: The Story of Aralam Farm, by M. S. Sreerekha, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XLV No 21, 22 May 2010, p. 57. Many reports of extreme poverty, deaths from malnutrition, deaths from starvation and suicides among the

adivasis of Kerala appeared in local newspapers as well as English and Hindi national dailies such as *The Hindu*, *Indian Express*, *Times of India*, *DNA India* and other research journals. During its three days Open Hearing sitting (8-10 April 2015) in Kerala, the Human Rights Commission expressed its concern at the migration of tribals from the bordering District of Waynad to Karnataka and the torture and exploitation they face while trying to earn a living working in ginger cultivation as the Government of Kerala was unable to provide them menial jobs under various schemes. Information available at <http://nhrc.nic.in/dispArchive.asp?fno=13576>

2. Ibid.

3. *When the lost soil beckoned-life sketch narrated by Janu*, life story of CK Janu translated from Malayalam by Prof. Usha Menon, All Saints College, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. Available at <http://samyukta.info/site/book/export/html/290>

4. *Some relief at last for unwed tribal mothers*, by Jeemon Jacob, *Tehelka magazine*, Vol 8, Issue 25, 25 June 2011; *Kerala's Beaten Women*, by KA Shaji, *Tehelka*, 18 August 2015. Available at http://archive.tehelka.com/story_main21.asp?filename=Ne110406mother_woer.asp

5. Ibid.

6. Political mobilization of adivasi communities in Kerala, p. 112, from Sodh Ganga, an online Reservoir of Indian Thesis, available at http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/19634/10/10_chapter4.pdf

7. Ibid. 114

8. Ibid. 113

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid. 115

11. Ibid. 116

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid. p. 121

14. Contemporary Kerala, Muthinga Incident, Available at

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http://www.universityofcalicut.info/SDE/VI_SemContemporary_Kerala.pdf

15. Ibid. p. 122

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. Statement made by C.K. Janu to the media soon after release from jail on bail, 27 April 2003 available at <http://india.indymedia.org/en/2003/04/4643.shtml>

20. *You have blood on your hands*, letter from Arundhati Roy to Kerala Chief Minister Antony, *Frontline* magazine, Volume 20 - Issue 06, 15 - 28 March 2003

21. No. 19 (12) CBI Final Recommendation: I & II, Kerala High Court Judgment, C. K. Janu vs Director on 4 December 2008.

22. Nearly 500 tribals committed suicide in Kerala in recent times, many facing mental problems, by J. Binduraj Kochi, September 27 2013 available at <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/suicides-among-tribals-tribals-upa-kerala/1/311996.html>

23. Seeking justice in God's own land, *The Hindu*, 11 September 2011

[This story is based on a review of the literature and personal interaction with C.K. Janu]

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PROLOGUE

India's Silent War on Adivasis: The Naxalite Struggle

Indian historian and writer Ramachandra Guha noted in a journal that the increasing presence of the Naxalite¹ insurgency in areas dominated by adivasis has a geographical reason. The hills and forests of central India are well suited to the methods of roaming guerilla warfare. It also has a historical reason, however, in that the adivasis have gained least and lost most from 60 years of political independence. How many Maoists are there in India? The estimates are imprecise, and vary widely. There are perhaps between 10,000 and 20,000 full-time guerillas, many of them armed with AK47s. What we know of the leaders and cadres suggests that most Maoists come from a lower-middle class background (also joined by some local tribals as foot soldiers). They usually have a smattering of education, and were often radicalized at college. Like other Communist movements, the Maoist or Naxalite leadership is overwhelmingly male. No tribals are represented in the upper levels of the party hierarchy.¹

A recent report by *The Indian Express* states, a total of 90 battalions (90,000 men) of central security force personnel and one Indian Reserve Naga Battalion (1,000 personnel) have been deployed for anti-Naxal operations in the Naxal-hit states.²

Over the years, all the conflict zones of Northeast India, Central East India and Jammu and Kashmir have been facing intensifying incidents of sexual violence, refusal to register cases against the accused, threats to witnesses, and illegal arrest and harassment. Indigenous women and children are highly vulnerable to violence, including killing, rape and torture perpetrated by non-indigenous persons, the security forces and members of armed opposition groups. In its 2006 Annual Report, the National Crime Bureau recorded a total of 669 cases of rape of indigenous women, compared to 640 cases in 2005, showing an increase of 9.2 percent.³

The HUNT, a recently released documentary [June 2015] film by Biju Toppo, a national award-winning film maker, and the book *Mission Saranda: A War for Natural Resources in India* by Gladson Dungdung, an adivasi activist and author from Jharkhand, reveal how this gun battle has devastated the lives of innocent adivasis in Odisha, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh. During "Operation Green Hunt"⁴, 6,000 innocent people in Jharkhand, 17,000 in Chhattisgarh and 2,000 in Odisha have been put in jail, falsely accused of being Maoist supporters and for providing food, water and shelter to the Naxalites; 1,057 people have been killed in false encounters and more than 500 women have been the victims of sexual harassment on the part of the security forces.⁵

While left-wing extremism (the government's preferred phrase for Naxal-related violence) has caused over 20,000 deaths in the country since 1980, it is not the extremists or the security forces who have suffered the most. Data accessed by *The Hindu* shows that the majority of those killed have been civilians. In fact, the ongoing conflict has claimed at least one life every day over a 35-year period beginning in 1980. The total body count, as of 30 June 2013, stood at 19,327, according to information obtained under the Right to Information Act. Recent data compiled by the Ministry of Home Affairs adds

another 685 fatalities to the record, bringing the total count to 20,012 as of 30 March 2015. As many as 12,146 civilians have lost their lives to left-wing extremism-related violence across the country. During this period, 4,761 extremists and 3,105 security personnel were killed, adding up to about two security personnel dying for every three extremists killed. Taking up the matter in the UN, India's envoy to the UN, Hardeep Singh Puri, told the UN Security Council that Maoist violence did not fall within the definition of armed conflict under international law.⁶

During the Rajya Sabha sessions of the Parliament, Haribhai Parathibhai Chaudhary, Minister of State for Home Affairs, read out his report saying, "The Left-Wing Extremist groups are reported to extort 'levy' from industrialists, businessmen, contractors, particularly *Tendu* leaves contractors, transporters, government servants and various illegal mining mafia groups in the LWE [left-wing extremism] affected states. Though an exact quantification is not possible, a study conducted by the Institute of Defence Studies and Analysis, Delhi has assessed that the Communist Party of India (Maoist) has been collecting not less than Rs 140 crore (1.4 billion) annually from a variety of sources."⁷ In a reply to a Right to Information Act (RTI) sought by social activist Swami Agnivesh, the jail authorities concerned of the Chhattisgarh government stated that, in January 2013, the total number of prisoners under trial in Naxal-related cases was 1,124, of which 1,069 were adivasis.⁸

| <u>Jail</u> | <u>Total</u> | <u>Adivasis</u> |
|-------------|--------------|-----------------|
| Jagdalpur: | 546 | 512 |
| Dantewada: | 377 | 372 |
| Kanker: | 144 | 134 |
| Durg: | 57 | 51 |

Report of the National Commission for Women (NCW) team's visit to Central Jail in Raipur in December 2012 noted that a total of 140 women prisoners were lodged in Central Jail

against a capacity of 80; there were no female doctor in the jail; no armed guards were to accompany the under trials to court leading to inordinate delays in settling cases, and poor access to legal aid for the mostly illiterate prisoners.⁹ Further, the latest 2014 National Crime Records Bureau statistics put Chhattisgarh among the States with the highest number of complaints i.e. 3,105, against the police for human rights abuses. However, only in 924 cases had judicial or magisterial inquiries been instituted.¹⁰ While conducting research in the southern regions of Chhattisgarh, eminent Supreme Court lawyer Ms Vrinda Grover found that between 2009 and 2014, the prison population swelled rapidly, with overcrowding figures now standing at 261 per cent above capacity. The data shows:

Total nos of jails: 27
 Available capacity in all jails: 6,070
 Inmate population in all jails: 15,840
 Female inmates: 821
 Male inmates: 15,019
 Under trials: 9,241
 Convicts: 6,586

Given this state of affairs, Soni Sori, a former school teacher, is just one of thousands of adivasis who have fallen victim to Naxal violence, pressed and pierced from all sides and crushed in the middle. What distinguishes her from others, however, is that she chose to stand for the 'truth' and 'justice'.

Endnotes:

1. A *Naxal* or *Naxalite*, also known as *Maoist*, is a member of any of the radical left Communist guerrilla groups in India, mostly associated with the Communist Party of India (Maoist). The term *Naxal* derives from the name of the village Naxalbari in West Bengal, where the movement had its origin in the late 1960s. Naxalism originated as a rebellion against feudalism and the marginalization of the poor and forest dwellers and gradually against the anti-people development policies of the government and poverty at the

local level in rural parts of eastern India. It slowly spread to other states. Oppressed people wanted their rights over land and resources, which had been denied them for generations. Left-wing parties had been trying to channel their demands in order to organize a peasant uprising, inspired by Mao's Chinese adventure to "overthrow the elitist rule". However, the Indian ruling class and the government reacted to the rebellion with heavy armed tactics, leading to a people's war. Now Naxalites are active in Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Kerala states.

2. Adivasis, Naxalites and Indian Democracy, Ramachandra Guha, *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol - XLII No. 32, 11 August 2007
3. Over 12,000 killed in Naxal violence in past 20 years. *The Indian Express*, 12 March 2014
4. *The Indigenous World*, 2009, International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, Denmark, p. 403
5. "Operation Green Hunt", is not a government term but coined and used by the Indian media to describe the wider anti-Naxal operations launched by the state police and the paramilitary forces in affected states. The operation is believed to have begun in November 2009 in the "Red Corridor" or Naxal-hit areas. This statement was confirmed by Gladson Dungdung at launch events for the book *Mission Saranda: A War for Natural Resources in India. The Hunt*, documentary by Biju Toppo, a national award-winning adivasi film maker from Jharkhand was broadcast on 27 June 2015 on the Doordarshan National TV Channel DD-I.
6. *The Hindu*, 19 April 2015. Statement made by Mr. Hardeep Singh Puri at the UN Security Council meeting quoted in the Press Release available at <http://www.un.org/press/en/2010/sc9956.doc.htm>
7. *The Indian Express*, 10 December 2014
8. Copy of the reply to RTI Act available at http://dantewadavani.blogspot.in/2013_03_22_archive.html
9. Chhattisgarh's torture cells. August 24, 2015. Available at [exposedhttp://m.thehindu.com/news/national/chhattisgarhs-torture-cells-exposed/article7560901.ece](http://m.thehindu.com/news/national/chhattisgarhs-torture-cells-exposed/article7560901.ece)
10. Ibid.

[8]

SONI SORI [1975-]

The Prisoner Of Conscience



"Giving electric shocks, stripping me naked, shoving stones inside me – is this going to solve the naxal problem?" - Soni to the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court

".....it isn't my suffering alone –in this jail, there are around 50 women who are in deep trouble. Like me, they were hunted and brought here, and then charged in false cases. Since the time that I was brought to this jail, every day people introduce me to new stories of their sufferings, and I think of you. I try to give them some faith..." - Soni Sori wrote in a letter from the Raipur central jail on 26 November 2011 to her *Guruji* (mentor), Himanshu Kumar, a Gandhian social worker.¹

In 2011, Soni Sori, a school teacher from the Naxal-hit Dantewada district of Chhattisgarh, was arrested by the police on charges of acting as a Maoist conduit. She was subjected to third-degree mental, physical and sexual torture by policemen. She communicated her afflictions through a series of letters to her mentor Himanshu Kumar, her lawyer, a Supreme Court Judge, the Supreme Court and others. In a

letter to her lawyer, she explained,

“...After repeatedly giving me electric shocks, my clothes were taken off. Superintendent of Police, Ankit Garg was watching me, sitting in his chair. While looking at my body, he abused me in filthy language and humiliated me. After some time, he went out and in a little while, he sent three boys. These boys started molesting me and I fell after they pushed me. Then they put things inside my body in a brutal manner. I couldn't bear the pain, I was almost unconscious. After a long time, I regained consciousness and found myself in the room in which I had slept. By then, it was already morning...”²

The letters were made public by the activists and organizations, who initiated several campaigns to free Soni Sori. Due to public pressure and a Supreme Court order, a medical examination was conducted by the Nil Ratan Sircar Medical College and Hospital in Kolkata. The report was presented in court and confirmed brutal torture; three stones had been inserted into her private parts and there were annular tears on her spine.³

After two and half years of imprisonment and a lengthy court saga, she was acquitted in six out of eight cases due to a lack of evidence and granted permanent bail in February 2014.

Early life and education

Soni Sori was born into a middle class, politically-active family in Bade Bedma village in Dantewada, Chhattisgarh. She belonged to the Koya tribe, which is one of the multilingual, multi-racial communities spread across Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. In the Maoist-controlled region, her father Mundra Ram Sori, educated his siblings as well as his own children. The oldest of three sons, Mundra Ram did not study but his younger brother Sonu Ram Sori became the first postgraduate of the region and is now a

sales tax inspector. The other brother, Nanda Ram Sori, was a former Member of the Legislative Assembly for the Communist Party of India for Dantewada constituency. Though illiterate at first, Mundra Ram learnt how to read and write, and went on to become the three-time *Sarpanch*⁴ (head of a village-level statutory institution) of his village.

Soni Sori obtained her education from the Mata Rukmani Devi Kanya Ashram in Dimripal. This was a Gandhian residential school for girls. Himanshu Kumar, who ran the Vanvasi Chetna Ashram,⁵ was her teacher and mentor. The Ashram worked for the promotion of education, health and economic development of adivasi communities. Being educated in the Ashram School, Soni took on board a Gandhian philosophy even as Naxal activities were on the rise.

She was married to Anil Futane, a driver, and together they built a happy life with their three children - Muskan, Deependra and Amrita. The children studied at boarding schools and Soni always encouraged them to work hard. She promised her son Deependra a computer if he gained good marks; he wanted to be a software engineer.

In 2002, Soni Sori was employed at a government-run residential primary school for tribal children in Jabeli. In 2006, she was appointed Principal and the school saw an expansion. As a teacher and as a hostel warden, she took care of around 100 children –mostly orphaned by the Naxal conflict. She monitored the children's nutrition personally, and even went on weekly trips to the market to fetch vegetables and food items. In an interview with *Tehelka* Magazine, she said,

“I believe promotion of education can end violence and bring peace in the region. I want to bring some future to these children.”⁶

Soni Sori was the only teacher who lived in the area, while

others had sought transfer to safer areas. Her family asked Soni Sori to seek a transfer but she remained there. She also needed the job to keep her children's education going. All the school buildings in the region, except in Sameli and Jabeli, were demolished by the Maoists, who claimed that the schools were shelters for the State forces. Once, the Maoists called for an *Adalat* (a People's Court), and ordered all schools to be closed down. Soni Sori requested they leave her school alone.

She asked, "The school serves people. If you are fighting for the people, how can you destroy our houses and schools?"

The Maoists allowed the school to function on one condition –that she would accept punishment if the police or the army were allowed entry into the school. "I risked my life and accepted the condition. So, they left my ashram alone."⁷

But she was worried; how could she stop the police or army from coming? She met and informed the Block Officer and the Education Officer and requested that they ensure the police did not come to her school. The police patrolled the school periphery but never went inside. Her school ran peacefully while other ashrams were demolished at night.

Previously, she had also stood up to the Maoists and asked them not to replace the national flag with a black flag at the school on Independence Day.

"This is what bothered the police. They wondered how I was able to keep everything running smoothly."⁸She also said,

"The Naxalites could have punished me for not listening to them; instead my own country's government officer punished me for standing up for our national flag. This is why I consider education important, because it has enabled me to hold a dialogue with the Naxalites regarding all issues."

Soni Sori had a strong belief in the power of education. She

wanted to replace guns with education and bring change to Bastar, which had turned into a battlefield.

Why was Soni Sori hounded by the police?

Educated and politically aware, Soni Sori was vocal in dealing with local politicians, the government administration, contractors, the police and even the Maoists. She witnessed several cases of police atrocities in the villages, including members of the state forces harassing women while they trekked to the forest to collect wood. She also led villagers on rallies and protests outside the local police station. Whenever her relatives or villagers were interrogated by the police, she intervened. She was joined by her nephew, Lingaram Kodopi, a straightforward young man who stood up for his people. He had refused the Maoists' offer of a party position.⁹In 2009, he also refused a police invitation to act as a SPO¹⁰ (Special Police Officer) or an informant, and instead chose to be a journalist. Since then, both Soni Sori and Lingaram had been on the police radar.

On 14 August 2009, in the dead of the night, a group of men knocked at the door of Soni Sori's house. When she enquired from inside, they pretended to be boys from her village. When she did not respond, they started banging on the door. Two women who were with Soni, opened the door.

The men said, "*Laal Salam*."¹¹ We are *maobadi* (Maoists)."

Soni said, "Whoever you are, why did you come to my house on this night?"

Without answering, they ransacked her house, took away all her belongings, including some money.

Prior to that, in June, her father's house had been attacked and looted by suspected Maoists who alleged that her family was acting as police informants. They brutally tortured her father and shot him in the leg.

On 31 August, Soni Sori and Lingaram were at her brother's house after submitting a letter to the local police station to claim compensation for the attack on her father's house. Soon, policemen in plainclothes picked up Lingaram and took him to the police station, and then to Dantewada. He was tortured and ordered to become an informant. Lingaram was picked up in front of Soni Sori and her family, but the next day newspapers quoted the police saying that Soni Sori was "absconding".

On the advice of Himanshu Kumar, Soni Sori and her brother Masaram Kodopi filed a Writ Petition before the Chhattisgarh High Court, alleging forcible detention of Lingaram by the police. On 6 October, the Honorable High Court of Chhattisgarh directed the police to let Lingaram go.

On their way back, the local police caught Masaram and detained him for a day. Lingaram and Soni Sori had taken a different route to reach home as they had rightly suspected that they would be harassed again. By the time they reached their village, the police had already approached villagers and arrested several people, including her father.

The police continued to intimidate Lingaram, for which reason he decided to migrate to Delhi and take up journalism at the International Media Institute of India, Noida. He also participated in various public meetings, intellectual discourse and People's Tribunals, describing atrocities against adivasis in the region and his own experience of being detained and tortured. Several television networks carried his story.

During this time, Lingaram also visited Tadmethla, Morapalli and Timmapuram villages in Dantewada where 300 huts in three villages had been burnt down, people killed and women raped by the state forces. A Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) inquiry was ordered. Lingaram met the victims and documented first-hand information. The Chhattisgarh police

were apprehensive about the evidence making its way to the CBI and they kept a close eye on Lingaram.

The police pressured Soni Sori into asking Lingaram to return. They also asked her to become a police informant. When she refused, her name was dragged into every incident involving the Maoists. According to police allegations in her leave petition, Soni Sori had attacked the Koakonda police station (on 13 July 2010), the Congress MLA Avdesh Gautam's house (on 14 July 2010), and the Tehsil Office (on 15 August 2010). She had also allegedly attacked the police at the Essar Steel Company (on 29 July 2010), and carried out attacks on trucks at Essar Gate (on 30 July 2010) and at Nerli valley (on 14 August 2010). Soni was implicated under Sections 121, 124 (1) and 120B of the Indian Penal Code as well as Section 8 (1) (2) (3) of the Chhattisgarh Special Public Security Act, 2005 (CSPSA) also known as Chhattisgarh Jansuraksha Adhiniyam and Sections 10 and 13 of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967.¹²

On 7 October 2010, a large group of Maoists attacked powerful Congress MLA and local contractor, Mr. Avdesh Gautam, killing his brother and injuring his son. Soni Sori and her husband Anil Futane were named as being responsible. At a press conference, Superintendent of Police (SP), S.R.P. Kalluri, declared Lingaram as the 'mastermind' behind the attack and alleged that he had received training from Delhi and Gujarat.¹³ Mr. Kalluri also claimed that Lingaram was in touch with activists Medha Patkar, Himanshu Kumar, Swami Agnivesh, Arundhati Roy and Nandini Sundar (a Professor at Delhi University).¹⁴ Swami Agnivesh held a press conference in Delhi and said that Lingaram was an innocent adivasi youth studying journalism in Delhi and challenged the Chhattisgarh police to provide evidence that implicated Lingaram.¹⁵ When no evidence could be found, the Chhattisgarh police were forced to make withdraw their statement.

Soni's husband was arrested in July 2010 in connection with the same case, although Soni said, "The whole of Dantewada knew that the MLA's house was attacked by Maoists, who claimed responsibility for the attack through the media."¹⁶

On the Koakonda police station attack charge sheet, Soni Sori was mentioned as an "absconder". The charge sheet stated that both Soni Sori and Lingaram were working as conduits between the multinational Essar Company and the Maoists through contractor, B. K. Lala, to carry out Naxalite activities. The police claimed that they had acted on a tip and had conducted a raid at which Soni Sori and Lingaram were caught red-handed while exchanging money with B. K. Lala in Palnar weekly market on 9.9.2011.¹⁷

However, in a sting operation carried out by *Tehelka* Magazine (known for its investigative journalism and sting operations) in September 2011, Constable Mankar of the Kirandul police station admitted during a phone conversation with Soni Sori that they were being framed in the Essar Steel Company attack case and that Lingaram had been picked up from the house and not from the market.¹⁸ Mankar also urged Soni Sori to flee since he believed the police were planning to kill her and label it an 'encounter'.

Soni told *Tehelka* on 11 September 2011, "The police are trying to kill me. They fired at me today. I fled. I fell into a hole as I was running. I need to stay alive to keep the truth alive. They don't want me to reach Delhi. I can't let them kill me."¹⁹

Fearing for her life, Soni fled to Delhi to obtain judicial protection. She took refuge in an unknown city, leaving behind her three young children. In the hope that the truth would set her free, she narrated her story of police harassment to *Tehelka*, and this was made public through the release of a video clip. Having consulted with her lawyer at the National Human Rights Law and Network, a collective of lawyers and

social activists, she was waiting for a petition to be filed at the Supreme Court of India. Before she could initiate any legal appeal, however, she was arrested by the Delhi Crime Branch and the Chhattisgarh Police on 4 October 2011.

Custodial torture

After being arrested in Delhi, Soni Sori was taken before the Sessions Court at Saket on 4-5 October 2011. She and her lawyer requested the court grant her bail but her plea was rejected. On 7 October, she was handed over to the Chhattisgarh police, the very same people who were a threat to her life. She was taken back to Dantewada and was taken before the Judicial Magistrate (first class) on 8 October. The magistrate directed the police to take Soni Sori into custody until 10 October on the condition that she would not be physically tortured, and would be medically examined by a registered medical practitioner before being taken into police remand and before being brought before the court.²⁰ Instead of being lodged in jail, Soni remained in the custody of the Sub-divisional Police Officer at Kirandul in Dantewada.

"I was not given any food or water. Ankit Garg (the Dantewada SP) said that I had troubled the police, running from one spot to another. Everything happens from this table. The governments, courts, all run from here. We got you back ultimately."²¹

Based on the evidences of custodial torture explained in the letters referenced above, on 8 October, Soni Sori was abused and brutally tortured in front of SP Ankit Garg and Sub-Divisional Police Officer (*SDPO*) of Kirandul Police Station. She bore the pain quietly. The next morning she was told to get ready for a court hearing. She was feeling unwell, and fell in the bathroom. After being found unconscious, she was taken to the government hospital. When she regained her

consciousness, she was taken to the Court even though she could not sit or walk.

“I had been threatened. Still, I kept looking for an opportunity to talk about my torture, but I was surrounded by police at all times. For a long time, we were kept outside the court and were not taken inside the court,” she wrote to her lawyer.

When the SDPO brought some papers from the court and asked her to sign, she said, “Sir, I want to testify in front of the Judge.” The Officer told her that she could testify later.

The police told the Judge that Soni could not be brought before court as she had sustained injuries after taking a fall in the bathroom that morning. She was taken back to the police station. By that time, her brother Ramdev and her relatives had arrived at the station. After being repeatedly questioned as to why they had kept her at the station in Dantewada when the court had ordered otherwise, Soni was taken to Jagdalpur Central Jail, which was nearly 125km away. On seeing her deteriorating condition, the jail authorities refused to admit her, and she was taken to the hospital. The examining doctor at the District Hospital said “she was brought in unconscious, the X-ray showed injuries to her head and back, and black marks were observed on her fingertips” –indicating that she had received electric shocks.²²

A video clipping featuring Soni appeared online the same day. It showed her writhing in pain in the hospital. From there she was referred to the Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Medical College, Raipur, another 350 km away, for further medical tests. The medical report stated that three stones had been found inserted into her private parts, and these were causing abdominal pain. The MRI scan also showed annular tears to her spine. After the medical check she was taken to Raipur central jail.

In jail she began a hunger strike. When her health worsened, on

20 October, the Supreme Court directed her treatment to be carried out at the Medical College in Kolkata.²³

In January 2013, the Supreme Court granted her wish to be transferred to the Jagdalpur Central Prison close to her children and family. In prison, she met several young adivasi girls who were in detention and had been tortured in the same way.

“Free Soni Sori” –Rise of the Campaign for Justice

As soon as the news of Soni Sori's alleged torture broke, nationwide protests were held, led by human rights activists, university students and women's groups. These prompted speedy court proceedings and Soni Sori's health was attended to urgently.

Due to the continuing protests and demands of various organizations, the National Commission for Women sought a report from the Chhattisgarh government. The government took four months to reply and the Commission simply did not take the case further.

Meanwhile, SP Ankit Garg denied all allegations. He was awarded the President's Police Medal for Gallantry on 26 January 2012 (Republic Day) for an anti-Maoist operation conducted in Mahasamund in October 2010. Six insurgents and two civilians were killed during the operation.²⁴ While the government's decision to honor him evoked angry reactions across the country, government sources said that his recommendation had gone to the Center long before the Soni Sori case unfolded.

Rights activists and women's groups went on a hunger strike near Raj Ghat (Samadhi of Gandhiji) demanding better healthcare for Soni Sori and action against the accused police officers. On 8 March 2012 (International Women's Day), Amnesty International considered Soni Sori and Lingaram

Kodopi as Prisoners of Conscience.²⁵ The organization launched an international campaign for the unconditional release of Soni Sori and an investigation into her allegations of torture. In September 2013, Amnesty International submitted a petition supported by over 10,000 people to the Chief Minister of Chhattisgarh.

“One Billion Rising” (a global campaign to end violence against women and girls) was also observed across the country for Soni Sori and women prisoners like her. Special solidarity programs were organized in Bangalore, Mangalore, Bhopal, Delhi, Hyderabad, Kolkata, Chennai, San Francisco, Boston and other cities. Throughout this campaign, Soni Sori was sent postcards in jail. Candlelight vigils and flash mobs held for her went viral on social media.

Previously, in November 2012, the National Human Rights Commission had visited Soni Sori in Raipur jail. Its report stated, “...on several occasions she was humiliated and ill-treated. Even as a prisoner, she has a right to personal dignity, and the right not to be subjected to psychological or physical abuses.”²⁶ Meanwhile, a team of the National Commission for Women visited Raipur central jail which in their report stated the inhuman condition of the inmates.

On 12 November 2013, both Lingaram and Soni Sori were granted bail until the hearing of the bail petition was concluded, on the condition that they would not enter Chhattisgarh during this time. Soni was acquitted in five cases out of eight. Both were escorted to their village by police officers so that they could meet their family for a day. The next day they were brought to Delhi and were permitted to stay there as long as they reported to a local police station every Sunday.

By this time, Soni Sori's mother had died of shock and

prolonged illness. Her father chose to live frugally after his entire house was looted. Her husband Anil Futane, who was also arrested for Maoist links, was acquitted in March 2013, but unfortunately, he suffered a paralytic stroke, and died in August. Soni Sori was not even granted interim bail to attend her husband's last rites, whereas the other accused, B. K. Lala and the director of Essar Steel Mr. Verma, were granted bail in January and February 2012 respectively. Three of her children were put in ashram residential schools and kept away from parental care.

Considering all these circumstances, on 7 February 2014, the Supreme Court granted her permanent bail. Soni Sori was acquitted in all cases except the Essar payoff. She therefore continued to report to the police station in question every week, and appeared before the trial court at every hearing.

The outpouring of anger and grief following Soni Sori's custodial torture, and thereafter the chilling Delhi gang rape case of a young medical student in December 2012, saw the country erupt in protests. These incidents brought an awakening to Indian society. For the first time in the history of the Indian justice system, the country saw the introduction of fast-track courts through the Criminal Law Amendment Ordinance of 2013 and all forms of sexual abuse attracted stringent punishment.

The story of Soni Sori and Lingaram is one of thousands of adivasis; a story of a state at war with its own people. Caught between the insurgents and the state machinery, they have nowhere to go. As Soni Sori's father rightly pointed out,

“... आगे से माओवादी गोली चलाती है, और पीछे से पुलिस.” (The Maoists shoot from the front and the police from the back).

In the words of historian Ramachandra Guha, “Pressed and pierced from both sides, crushed in the middle.”²⁷

However, it is also a story of incredible integrity and courage. After two and a half years in custody, Soni Sori is trying to rebuild her shattered life and the lives of others. She is back with her people, determined to bring an end to the injustices and atrocities committed against people like her and to bring about change in the system. She continues to assist her people in court processes and to lead various campaigns.

In 2014, she joined the Aam Admi Party (AAP) and contested the Lok Sabha elections in Bastar, but she lost to the BJP candidate and came fourth. However, in her political debut, it is a win for Soni Sori that 16,903 people (voters) stood by her in thought and values.

Today, the voice of Soni Sori has become the voice of many. Her life is best reflected in the verse of Ella Wheeler Wilcox,

*I am the Voice of the Voiceless;
Through me the dumb shall speak;
Till the world's deaf ear be made to hear
The wrongs of the wordless weak.*

*From street, from cage, and from kennel,
From jungle and stall, the wail
Of my tortured kin proclaims the sin
Of the mighty against the frail.*

*The same Force formed the sparrow
That fashioned man, the king;
The God of the Whole gave a spark of soul
To furred and to feathered thing.*

*And I am my brother's keeper,
And I will fight his fight,
And speak the word for beast and bird,
Till the world shall set things right.*

Endnotes:

1. Copies of letters written in Hindi by Soni Sori from different jails were widely shared with the media and public by activist Himanshu Kumar. They are available at <https://sonisori.wordpress.com>, other websites, online petitions and social media created for the purpose of campaign.
2. Ibid.
3. *Shockingly, Soni Sori Has Been Sexually Tortured With Stones. Who Will Answer For This? Tehelka*, 24 December 2011, Issue 51, Volume 8. Available at <http://www.tehelka.com/2011/12/shockingly-soni-sori-has-been-sexually-tortured-with-stones-who-will-answer-for-this>
4. A *Sarpanch* is an elected head of a village-level statutory institution of the local self-government organization Gram Panchayat.
5. Vanvasi Chetna Ashram was bulldozed in 2009 by the Chhattisgarh Police for bringing the Singaram massacre to the court and raising human rights violations. Letter of Himanshu Kumar to DGP-CG, *Tehelka* magazine, 11 December 2010, Issue 49, Volume 7.
6. *Tehelkatv*, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2W6dKalOgRU>
7. Interview with *Tehelka*, 22 February 2014, Issue 8, Volume 11.
8. *Tehelkatv*, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2W6dKalOgRU>
9. *They dared to speak up. But that's not done in Dantewada, Tehelka*, 13 September 2011. http://archive.tehelka.com/story_main50.asp?filename=Ws130911police
10. Known as SPOs (Special Police Officers), tribal youth were recruited as informers and were paid between Rs 1500 to 3000 (\$ 20-45) per month by the State Government. They were trained with rifles and in guerrilla fighting techniques. In 2011, the Supreme Court directed the operation of bodies such as the SPOs, Koya Command and Salwa Judum to be banned and the arming of civilians as unconstitutional and illegal.
11. *Laal Salam'* meaning 'Red Salute', a salute, greeting or code language used by Communists in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal. *Laal* means red, and *Salam* means greeting or peace in the Arabic or Persian usage. This greeting is common among all communist parties of India and Naxalites often use this phrase. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lal_Salam
12. Special Leave Petition (Criminal) of 2013
13. The Inconvenient Truth of Soni Sori. *Tehelka*, Volume 8, Issue 41, 15 October 2011

14. Ibid.
15. *The Hindu*, 13 July 2010
16. *Tehelkatv*, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2W6dKaIOgRU>
17. Supreme Court Judgment, Criminal Appellate Jurisdiction Criminal Appeal No. 357 of 2014 [Arising out of Special Leave to Appeal (Criminal) No. 7898 of 2013] p.2 Available at <http://judis.nic.in/supremecourt/imgs1.aspx?filename=41210>
18. *Tehelkatv*, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qgtBZeLluWs>
19. *They dared to speak up. But that's not done in Dantewada, Tehelka*, 13 September 2011. Available http://archive.tehelka.com/story_main50.asp?filename=Ws130911police
20. *Supreme Court Writ Petition (Criminal) No.206 of 2011*. Available at <http://courtnic.nic.in/supremecourt/temp/2062011420102011p.txt>
21. *Tehelkatv*, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2W6dKaIOgRU>
22. Available at <https://sonisori.wordpress.com>
23. *Supreme Court Writ Petition (Criminal) No.206 of 2011*. Available at <http://courtnic.nic.in/supremecourt/temp/2062011420102011p.txt>
24. Outrage over gallantry award for Chhattisgarh police officer, by Sonal Mehrotra, 30 January 2012. Available at <http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/outrage-over-gallantry-award-for-chhattisgarh-police-officer-571276>
25. Prisoner of Conscience (POC) is a term coined by Peter Benenson in a 28 May 1961 article "*The Forgotten Prisoners*" for the London Observer newspaper, which launched the campaign "Appeal for Amnesty 1961" and first defined a "prisoner of conscience" as "any person who is physically restrained (by imprisonment or otherwise) from expressing (in any form of words or symbols) any opinion which he honestly holds and which does not advocate or condone personal violence."
26. Statement of the National Human Rights Commission, available at <https://sonisori.wordpress.com/tag/national-human-right-commission/>
27. *Adivasis, Naxalites, and Indian Democracy*, by Rama Chandra Guha, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XLII, No. 32, 11 August 2011.

[This story is based on interaction with Soni Sori and facts and figures referenced from various relevant documents]



Photo:Teheka
Soni Sori being taken to Saket High Court, Delhi



Used bullets (in Sukuma)



Protest in Delhi



International Campaign "Free Son Sori"



Under the leadership of Soni Sori Nahadi village unite against police atrocities



Assisting women of Nahadi village to make their statements in front of the Sub Divisional Magistrate



At the age of 17, Kawasi Himde (center) was arrested for being involved in the killing of 23 policemen in Dantewada. Acquitted after 7 years in March 2015, Himde said she was tortured and sexually assaulted in jail and police station. She lost her parents as a child and now wants to join Soni Sori in her fight for justice.



Soni Sori visiting Ramshilo Gawde, a young girl at the hospital to take account of her condition

Photo credit: Lingaram Kodpi, a journalist and activist from Bastar

PROLOGUE

The Magnificent Todas of the Nilgiris

Discovery of Ootacamund (Ooty) and the Todas

The Nilgiris literally means the blue mountains. It is a range of mountains and part of the Western Ghats spread across the division between the state of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala in South India. It is one of the most beautiful hilly terrains of India, endowed with exotic beauty and serenity, steep hills, and narrow valleys with a number of rivers, waterfalls and lakes. The Nilgiris is also home to many tribes known to be the original settlers. There have been extensive studies done on the Todas by ethnographers and researchers such as the British explorer and geographer, Richard Francis Burton, and the theosophist Madame H. P. Blavastsky, who have both published accounts of the Todas, and W.H.R. River, whose weighty book on the subject is widely regarded as one of the classics of modern anthropological scholarship.¹

The first record of European interest in the Nilgiris was in 1602, when Francisco Roy, the first Roman Catholic Bishop of the Syrian Christians, sent a Jesuit priest, Father Giacomo Fininico, and a Syrian Christian deacon, from Calicut (Kerala) to investigate stories of a lost group of Christians “in a country

called Todamala”² (part of the Nilgiris or Toda mountain) and who had been driven from the territory of St. Thomas by many wars in former times and scattered throughout this region.³ They found Todas and Badagas whom they believed to be descended from the ancient Christians of St Thomas,⁴ one of the disciples of Jesus who came to South India in 52 AD to spread the “good news”. The priest reported that he had conversed with a Toda priest, and presented “looking glasses and hanks of thread” to the Toda women but returned with “no information leading to the supposition that either they or their ancestors ever had anything to do with any form or profession of Christianity”.⁵

There was almost no European interest in the region for the next two hundred years. From 1799 onwards, the Nilgiris were included in the revenue areas of Coimbatore, and Sir Frederick Price, author of *Ootacamund: A History*, writes that a *Chetty* (man from a trader community) would periodically collect revenue.⁶ There are two stories that led to the discovery of present-day Ooty, previously called Udthagamandalam, Ottaikalkamund and then Ootacamund by the British. *Othakall* in Tamil literature means single stone, perhaps a reference to a sacred stone revered by the Todas, and *mund* in the Toda language means their village or habitat.⁷ According to Frederick Price's report, in 1819, two Europeans in pursuit of a *Poligar* (a subordinate feudal chief in the Presidency of Madras) accused of robbing Coimbatore (Tamil Nadu) peasants followed the *Poligar* through a mountain pass and 'discovered' what was later to become the town of Ootacamund, then a Toda settlement.⁸ Another story goes that they may have been on a shooting expedition.

The following year John Sullivan, Permanent Collector of Coimbatore made a tour to the Nilgiris, and wrote a letter from “Nilgherry Hills” to Thomas Munro, Governor of Madras saying, “This is the finest country ever.....it resembles I suppose

Switzerland more than any other part of Europe....the hills beautifully wooded and fine strong spring with running water in every valley....”⁹

In 1822, Sullivan started building Stone House (landmark of Ooty) by acquiring lands from the Todas at one rupee an acre and lived there for a few years with his family. He quickly cornered huge tracts of lands and, by 1828, there were some 25 European houses, churches and other houses of immigrants from the plains. In the same year, a military cantonment was made,¹⁰ and which is now known as Wellington in present-day Coonoor town. Sullivan was highly impressed by the way the tribes cooperated and sought to maintain balance while developing the town. He argued, as early as 1832, that the “natives should be entrusted with a great share in the administration of their own affairs”.¹¹ He also advocated the view that the Todas had total proprietary rights over the lands in the Nilgiris plateau and that they should receive compensation for any land acquired from them. His liberal attitude towards tribals brought him into conflict with senior government officials.¹²

Soon after the construction of the first road in Otacamund in 1820, the demographics began to change rapidly and the tribals who had inhabited the region for centuries quickly became a minority. According to the 1881 census, tribal communities closely associated with the Nilgiri Hills, such as the Kota, Todas, Badagas, Kumumbas and Irulas then comprised only 37% of the total population.¹³

In this process, large tracts of forest and lands were converted to plantations of eucalyptus, tea, pine and exotic plants, and for public infrastructure development. Today, some of the Toda lands are protected as part of the Nilgiris Biosphere Reserve (1986), which covers some 5,520 sq km and which is also a UNESCO World Heritage site (2012) and one of the eight

“hotspots” of biological diversity in the world.

Toda life and culture

The Todas were pastoralists who grazed their cattle exclusively on the Nilgiris plateau.¹⁴ The Toda population was 693 in 1871 and 1,560 in 2001 (community records statesome1,500-2,000). The Government of India also considers them to be one of the particularly vulnerable tribal groups (PVTGs).

The pride of Todas and daughter of the blue mountains, Vasamalli Kurdtozn, a notable social activist from Ooty, narrated the story of the Todas:

The Todas have their own Toda language (no script), sacred customs and ritual regulations. They believe their ancestors inhabited the Nilgiris Hills from the beginning of mankind. According to their creation stories, Goddess *Tokisy/Teikirzi/Teikirshy* and her brother first created the sacred buffalo and then created the Toda man. There are two types of buffalo. The first type is the sacred buffaloes '*Poshirr*', which belong to '*Thee*' or holy places. They are looked after with devotion and care and they are milked by the temple priest. The second type is the '*Pithiirr*' or domestic buffaloes. Toda buffaloes are considered to be native to Nilgiris.

The Todas traditionally lived in small hamlets called '*munds*' or '*modr*' in the Toda language. Their traditional huts are rainbow-shaped with thatched roofs and are spread across the mountain slopes. Front walls are usually decorated with kinds of rock mural paintings and some unique symbols. The huts usually have a small entrance, probably meant for protection from wild animals and the cold climate. However, most Todas now live in small concrete houses.

Every *munds* has a '*Poly Vorse*' (temple or shrine). The sacred

buffaloes are worshiped and their milk is used for temple offerings. There are three types of worshiping places: 'Thee', 'Po' and 'Wiserle Polly'. There is no particular priest clan or family. All men can be priests by following certain rules, rituals and abstinence as long as they hold the position. Temples are not regularly open but should be opened atleast once a year for rituals. In the early days, temples were open throughout the year. There were more buffaloes at that time, so people used to milk them every day, offer at the temple, and make ghee and other items. A tiny door is made in the temples through which only the priest is allowed to enter and perform rituals. There is no idol worship and their rituals comprise earthen and bamboo vessels to pour milk, curd, butter and ghee (butter oil) into *diyas* (earthen lamps), ancient sacred objects which are of different shapes.

Traditionally, two funeral rites are followed. First, the body is cremated and then a relic or a bunch of hair is later burnt. Todas believe in an afterlife not in rebirth, and their afterworld is located at the southwest corner of the upper Nilgiris.

Todas have high reverence for land, trees, mountains and nature as their culture and lifestyle is closely associated with it. Their homeland continues to be an abode of wildlife such as Nilgiritahr, sambar, Indian gaur, barking deer, Nilgirilangur, leopards and tigers, Asian elephants, endemic birds and other species; there are large areas of natural vegetation, flora and fauna, and water resources. They consume seasonal forest foods and dairy items. They make buffalo milk into butter, butter milk, ghee, curd (yogurt) etc. With the changing times and shrinking grassland, however, many Todas have given up their pastoral lifestyle and shifted to agricultural ventures and other occupations. Vasamalli said, "We are not supposed to take up cultivation; it is an offense or culturally inappropriate. The Todas are vegetarians and the buffalo is therefore the center of both cultural and economic life, but the younger

generations have started eating non-vegetarian food outside, but these are not cooked at home." They have adopted modern attire and only use traditional garments called 'Puthukuli' on special occasions.

Although Toda society is patriarchal, Toda women enjoy greater freedoms and they do not feel inferior to their men. Women are not allowed to enter the temple premises as menstruation is considered 'impure' and they should not face towards the temple during this period. While the naming ceremony for a male child is solemnized at the temple, for a female child, the name is given at home. However, Vasamalli does not consider this as gender inequality, as she says, "By facing towards the temple, we can perform our rituals from home or anywhere. Having vision of the temple itself is equal to having vision of the God for us. Every woman has to light the lamp at home (the Todas consider lamps as 'the presence of God') by thinking of their ancestral God." They are also obliged to perform certain rituals for the dead and in connection with other ceremonies, perform healing and give treatment to the sick through use of medicinal plants.

The Todas have a large amount of oral poetry and songs, music, stories and legends. They live in a casteless society, and there is no hierarchical practice among them.

There is much to be learnt from this community: vegetarianism, pastoralism, family planning (maintenance of small population), peaceful co-habitation without caste, class or hierarchical practices, a culture of non-violence, conservation and sustainable lifestyle etc.

Endnotes:

1. Dane Keith Kennedy, *The Magic Mountains: Hill Stations and the British Raj*, University of California Press, 1996, pp. 70-71
2. Sir Frederic Price, *Otacamund: A History, Compiled for the*

Government of Madras, Printed and Published by the Superintendent, Government Press, 1908, p.1; Kavita Philip, Civilizing Natures: Race, Resources and Modernity in South Colonial India, Orient Blackswan, New Delhi, 2003, p. 43.

3. Richard K. Wolf, *The Black Cow's Footprint: Time, Space, and Music in the Lives of the Kotas*, Permanent Black, 2005, p. 26.
4. 'The Mission of Todamala', in Portuguese manuscript translated by A. d'Alberti for W.H.R. Rivers, *The Todas*, 719-30, (London: Macmillan and Co, 1906).
5. From the Jesuit priest's 1603 report on his visit to Otacamund, cited in Price, Otacamund, 1-2. Price also mentions the name of the Jesuit Priest, called Ferreiris in an early translation, and Fenicio, Feninico in W.H.R. River's later translation.
6. Ibid. Kavita Philip, *Civilizing Natures: Race, Resources and Modernity in South Colonial India*, Orient Blackswan, New Delhi, 2003, p. 44.
7. Sir Frederic Price, *Otacamund: A History, Compiled for the Government of Madras, Printed and Published by the Superintendent, Government Press, 1908, pp. 14-15*
8. Kavita Philip, *Civilizing Natures: Race, Resources and Modernity in South Colonial India*, Orient Blackswan, New Delhi, 2003, p. 44.
9. *One Man's Ooty*, Mukund Padmanabhan written on the 150th anniversary of the death of John Sullivan, Founder of Ootacamund, *The Hindu*, 16 January 2005, available at <http://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/mag/2005/01/16/stories/2005011600580100.htm>
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Richard K. Wolf, *The Black Cow's Footprint: Time, Space, and Music in the Lives of the Kotas*, Permanent Black, 2005, p. 30.
14. Dane Keith Kennedy, *The Magic Mountains: Hill Stations and the British Raj*, University of California Press, 1996, p. 71.

[9]

VASAMALLI KURDTOZN [1958-]

Daughter of the Blue Mountains and Guardian of Toda Culture



*"Sacred 'Inmoosre'
Without you, we don't have a temple,
We don't have lamp,
We don't have ceremonies,
You are the beauty of us;
You are giving life to us"*

- Hymn dedicated to the Sacred Buffalo

Fifty seven-year-old Vasamalli has the distinction of being the first Toda woman to obtain a B.Sc. Degree (Bachelor of Science). In the 18th century, after the expansion of the Colonial Empire from the Madras Presidency to the Blue Mountains (Nilgiris), most of the Toda elders considered education and (Christian) conversion a threat to their rich traditional culture and community. No girls were encouraged into education. However, one ambitious girl opted for a tribal residential school to escape early marriage. When her grandparents strongly objected to her wish to study further at a college in Coimbatore, an urban city, she had to promise them that she would never convert.

Breaking all barriers and social taboos, she made her way to Madras University in the late 1980s, when most girls of her age had dropped out of school. At the time, girls' education was not encouraged enough, even among the advanced communities.

Brilliant in her studies, this exceptional girl wanted to become a doctor, but her life had a different plan. She was called to be the steward of her own people and to protect their culture, which was in peril. Leaving behind all her desires and dreams, she chose to be a humble servant of her people.

Early life and education

Vasamalli Kurdtozn (pronounced Korrataz) was born into a patriarchal Morthkeor clan at Karikadu Mund near Avalanche, to the late Kurdtozn and her mother, Rancin. She is the eldest daughter of eight siblings. One of the unique features of the Toda culture is that while men are named after mountains, stones, trees, holy places etc., women are named after ornaments, rivers, flowers or house names. 'Rancin' for example means 'queen of the good or pure gold' and Vasamalli means jasmine flower. The names are never repeated.

As the buffalo is the center of Toda culture and livelihood, those days the elders were keen on raising more buffaloes for the family, and the children were expected to be a part of this task. Vasamalli, however, chose a path to literacy. She went to the Thakkar Bappa Gurukulam, a residential school, 15km from Ooty. There she studied through to class 8. Her sisters and brothers dropped out of school and became involved in the family's affairs. Her elder sister took care of the children and another was married off young. Although the unfamiliar language (Tamil) and English, along with a tough syllabus, was a barrier for Vasamalli, she learnt quickly.

On completing class 8, she wanted to pursue her studies further. She went to stay with her grandparents and studied at the Government Higher Secondary School in Ithalar. Her grandparents were against her going to college but her mother and aunts were supportive. She attended Avinashilingam Home Science College for Women, Coimbatore, which offers courses in family and social welfare. She took up Microbiology,

biochemistry, geology, botany, chemistry and Home Science. Initially, her father was also not in favor of her studies but he slowly changed and, at times, felt proud when neighbors commented, "Oh, your girl is studying in college. She is so brilliant!" Vasamalli challenged herself to excel in these tough subjects. "The college offered very lively courses. I was brilliant, infact, all our people are brilliant. But because they were not encouraged and were married off at a young age many girls dropped out of school," she says.

In her case, too, it happened. Before she could complete her final semester, she was married off to Pothali Kuttan, a revolutionary community leader. In those days, fraternal polyandry was practiced by the Todas.¹ Marriage was agreed at an early age with a ritual although the girl could continue to live with her parents until she reached puberty. In the intervening period, many customs and rituals would be followed. The marriage would be solemnized with a "Bow and Arrow Ceremony" at the time of the first pregnancy, at which the girl is presented with a bow and arrow by the man, symbolizing his acceptance of the fruit of her womb and clan membership of their children. Vasamalli, however, set an example against child marriage by marrying at the age of 23 and deciding to continue her studies even after marriage.

Family life and social service

Being in her husband's environment, Vasamalli developed a passion for social work. Alongside this, she still had to complete her studies and do the household chores. Nonetheless, within a year of marriage she had completed her final semester and she received her degree in 1979. The following year, the bow and arrow ceremony was solemnized. It was a kind of relief for her, as she says that she was troubled with many marriage proposals. She soon became the mother of two children. As her husband was primarily engaged in social work, to make ends meet she took up

a clerical job at the Hindustan Photo Film Manufacture Ltd., in Ooty, a national producer of photographic and X-ray films. Later, she was upgraded to Section Officer Grade, where she earned Rs. 7, 000 (nearly \$ 100) per month.

She worked hard to provide the best education for both her sons. She would put them in a play school before going to work. And, back home, she did the household work all alone. She admitted them into English-medium schools. She wanted a daughter but economic constraints prevented her from having any more children. Her earnings were barely enough to make a living and, in addition to this, Vasamalli and her husband had to pay back a loan they had taken out. Besides work, and raising children, from time to time Vasamalli also engaged in social work. At times, her in-laws did not like her way of going about things. As she says, “Not only in-laws, but others too did not like it. It was a new change for them. It took some time to accept. They had lots of buffaloes and many children to take care of. They expected us to keep up the family traditions”.

Dreams of becoming a doctor turned to despair. Alongside all her responsibilities, Vasamalli was admitted to a Master's degree in Sociology, but unfortunately she could not complete it. She and her husband worked hard to bring social change to the community, for example ending the harmful practices of child marriage and buffalo sacrifice and promoting education, protection and promotion of traditions and culture, creation of employment opportunities etc. Together, they founded Toda Seva Sanmarga Sangam, a social welfare organization in 1978. They focused on saving the Toda buffalos as they had began to dwindle from over 5000 to 1000 due to practice of sacrifice during the funeral as they believed that sacrificed buffaloes would accompany the departed soul. Vasamali and her husband mobilized the youth in the community and started awareness on saving them and stopped practice of sacrificing them. Initially there were opposition from the community members;

once they tried to chase them away from the *mund* and some even doused them with petrol to burn them. But Vasamali and her husband took help of the police and animal husbandry departments to save the buffaloes from being sacrificed.

Due to her prior engagement with community endeavors Vasamalli often had to take leave from the Hindustan Photo Film Manufacture. Finally, in 2002, she decided to take voluntary retirement and thereafter became fully involved in community welfare activities.

Restoration of land rights

Besides being involved in the Toda Seva Sanmarga Sangam, Vasamalli also became a Board Member of the State Tribal Welfare, Government of Tamil Nadu, and worked for proper implementation of the Forest Right Acts (2006) as it is very important for the community to identify and claim their traditional lands. After losing land and forest first to the British and, later, to the Indian government and settlers, large tracts of forest land were converted into tea estates, farmland, and used for other purposes such as railways, dams, the Wellington Cantonment and many tourist spots. In this process, without much knowledge of government rules and regulations, the Toda people had lost their rights over land and forest. As Vasamalli says, “Our people were thinking that all forest lands, mountains, and buffaloes belonged to us. Now with a collective effort, we have been able to identify some portion of community land and claim our right.” The government has issued conditional *patta* or land records to them, which means that the land cannot legally be sold to anyone other than a person belonging to a scheduled tribe. She recalls one situation where the government wanted to build a court near the Meadow Residency and put up demarcation flags. The Todas objected and the work was stopped. Now they are making an effort to map their own *munds*, grassland, sacred and pilgrim places,

funeral grounds etc. However, despite this, grazing lands traditionally belonging to the Todas are still sometimes being taken by the government for different purposes.

Self-sufficiency programs

It is said that embroidery is an absorbing form of cultural expression and often tells the story of civilization itself.² The Toda women, who are naturally talented and skilled in *Puthukuli* embroidery, make heavily-embroidered full-length patterned shawls with black and red threads on white cloth, which are unique. The shawls can be used on both sides and are in high demand. With rising literacy rates, many young girls have opted to work in urban areas, and Toda women have become worried that the craft and skill will fade away, not passed down from mother to daughter anymore.³ Given this situation, as Director of a Tribal Women's Cooperative Society, Vasamalli not only managed to create employment opportunities but also to maintain their tradition of embroidery making. There are now some 300 Toda women members of the cooperative society. The society provides raw materials for making shawls and other handicrafts and also agricultural loans to self-help groups and individuals. Vasamalli also monitors various government schemes aimed at the community, and keeps track of the funds and their proper utilization. As she says, "Even though the government is doing many developmental activities, we have to mediate or coordinate so that our people can take full advantage of the facilities, like how to apply and get loans, how to make use of available funds. Sometimes funds lapse without proper utilization".

Vasamalli also coordinates educational programs for the Todas, providing counseling and guidance to the students and parents. She feels proud to see so many young boys and girls doing excellently in many fields. Recently, nearly 100 tribal youth from all tribes were trained in report writing and visual

documentation by the Tribal Research Center, Ooty. Vasamalli says that now these girls and boys can contribute to research and documentation of their own oral traditions, tribal knowledge, folklore, art, songs and music etc.

International endeavors

Vasamalli has been part of many intellectual discussions, at both national and international level. She submitted a paper on 'Protection of Grassland' at a conference in Dhaka and was selected for the 5th World Parks Congress, Durban (2003) organized by the International Union for Conservation of Nature. She had the opportunity to attend the Congress, workshops and group discussions, meet representatives of various indigenous communities and experts, and go on a field visit to pastoral communities and one of the national parks in South Africa.

In May 2006, on behalf of the Standing Committee of the Dana Declaration on Mobile Peoples and Conservation and the World Alliance of Mobile Indigenous Peoples (WAMIP), Vasamalli was invited to attend the Fifth Session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) in New York. She was one of 20 representatives who came from Africa, the Middle East and Asia to participate in the UNPFII meetings. In order to raise awareness of their circumstances and vulnerability, she represented her community at a side event and raised the issues of mobility, livelihood, conservation and environmental impacts on Todas.

In another conference in Rome, she raised the issue of loss of grassland due to plantation and other activities in the plateau. There, she appealed for non-implementation of the Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) proposal on the genetic study of Toda buffaloes, arguing that the buffaloes were sacred and the study therefore culturally inappropriate. Instead she requested that the funds be used to protect the community's lands so that the existing buffaloes could grow more.

Vasamalli has also been a messenger of the Toda's culture of "peace and non-violence". Once she was invited by the Women's Society in Munich, Germany to give a presentation, where she spoke about the Toda's practice of vegetarianism and environmentalism. As she said, "We always believed in non-violence, which is known as '*dharma*' in Indian culture, which Gandhiji also propagated. Only if we are good people can we find eternal life or release after death and join our ancestors."

Other vocation

Vasamalli actively works to protect and promote Toda buffalo breeding as the community had begun to lose interest in doing so. In order to revive the shrinking culture, initially they involved 30 hamlets and provided them with awareness raising and education on buffalo breeding, including how to take care of and protect the calves. She also founded the Panjapandavar Toda Buffalo Rearer Association which has now reared about 1, 500 buffaloes in the 65 Toda *munds*. Since the forest department has expanded eucalyptus plantation and other exotic plants in the grassland around the Toda hamlets, no sufficient space was available for grazing. She had approached the forest department to reclaim the grassland for the buffaloes to graze.

With a sound knowledge and experience of indigenous peoples' issues, Vasamalli and her husband, Pothali Kuttan, also act as resource people to many scholars, institutions, journalists and tourists who are interested in learning about the Toda people and their culture. She served as a member of the Nilgiri District Integrated Religious Peace Committee and was awarded Woman of the Year 2006 by the Rotary Club of Tirupur and Nilgiri Women's Association.

She is currently working with the Sahitya Akademi (National Academy of Letters, New Delhi) to collect and document Toda traditional songs and stories. She plans to establish a Cultural

Center (covering all six communities in Nilgiris) so that they can protect and promote their cultures, and so that they have a place to make and store their own traditional musical instruments, which are slowly vanishing as the communities often have to borrow or lend the instruments from or to neighboring villages.

The Toda have played a crucial role in protecting the Nilgiris. They have magnificently integrated their own culture with the rich bio-diversity. Like all other indigenous communities in the country, however, the Toda have become a victim of cultural assimilation efforts, first by the European Missionaries and later by the predominant Indian culture and religions. This has brought both negative and positive effects to their culture and lifestyle.

Due to her wisdom, gentleness and smart decisions, Vasamalli is a well-known figure among the Toda. She has intervened on every matter that has threatened their culture and survival. Living in tranquility and social harmony, the community continues to uphold its ethos, as Vasamalli says, "Compared to other indigenous groups in the country, our people, particularly the women and children have not been affected by any kind of physical or social violence."

As one of the most ancient tribes, and with the community striving to keep its traditions alive, Vasamalli has done her part and now the rest needs to be accomplished by the younger generation. Amidst various challenges, and adventures, she has proved herself to be "a woman of substance".

Endnotes:

1. Earlier Toda people practiced child marriage and fraternal polyandry, in which a woman in polyandrous union was the shared spouse of a set of brothers, with whom she lived in a common home. They now no longer do this.
2. Toda Embroidery - a poem in black and red written with needle and thread, available at <http://www.oneearthfoundation.in/?p=101>
3. Ibid



A Toda temple (pic. 1), a Toda mund or hamlet with fenced off open shed for buffaloes (pic 2) at the top of the Govt. Botanical Garden, at Ooty. The traditional rainbow shaped huts have been replaced with small concert houses.



With the booming real estate business plots are ready for sale Tea estate near Conoor



Vasamalli and her husband Pottali Kuttan in traditional dress "puthukuli" Cash crop farming, organic farming, farming of exotic vegetables like broccoli, iceberg, lettuce, zucchini and other vegetables are mostly exported to nearby cities of Bangalore, Chennai, Coimbatore, Hyderabad etc. Iceberg lettuce used in salad is supplied to 270 McDonalds outlets across the country.

This story is based on personal interview and related literature

PART - IV

SPORTS HEROINES



PROLOGUE

ADIVASIS OF CHHOTANAGPUR IN HOCKEY INDIA

How many of us know these names: Biswasi Purti, Helen Soy, Sumrai Tete, Jyoti Sunita Kullu, Adline Kerketta, Asunta Lakra, Kanti Baa or Deep Grace Ekka? Most probably no one! They are some of India's most successful athletes –the real hockey stars of India.

It is not our fault that we do not know them: they do not endorse products, do not have big sponsors, their photos are not on billboards. Neither newspapers nor magazines advertise their achievements, and nor are their matches relayed on HD Sports Channels.

As hockey is commonly known as India's "national game", it is supposed to be an intrinsic part of the culture of the country. People should love it, watch it and play it. Contrary to popular perception, however, in a reply to a Right to Information (RTI) query made in August 2012, the sports ministry said there was no such record of hockey being declared the 'national game'.¹ It may have been considered such due to the golden period of Indian hockey that fetched six Olympic Gold medals between 1928-1956, two Gold medals in the 1964 and 1980 Olympics, one Silver in the 1960 Olympics, two Bronze in the 1964 and 1980 Olympics and one World Cup victory in 1975.

It has been very disappointing for many Indian hockey lovers that, after achieving such great heights, hockey has not won the hearts of the people of the country. The increase in cricket's popularity could be due to India's triumph in the 1983 Cricket World Cup, which brought the country the much awaited trophy, and their winning the World Championship once again in 2011. Prior to 1983, India had hardly any significant achievements in cricket. Additionally, the substantial performance, celebrity treatment of the cricketers, corporate investments, revenue generation, and the number of matches played all contribute to its popularity. In comparison, hockey has suffered from government apathy, a lack of good management, proper grooming, training, infrastructure, poor performance and a lack of media space.

When Indian hockey was on the up, the women's team's breakthrough performance came at the Women's Hockey World Cup at Mandelieu in 1974, where they took fourth place. Their best performance was at the first women's hockey event at the 1980 Moscow Summer Olympics where they finished in fourth place. They also won the Gold medal at the 1982 Asian Games held in Delhi. Captain Suraj Lata Devi led the team even further, winning the Gold medal at the 2002 Commonwealth Games, (which inspired the Bollywood film "*Chak De India*" starring Shah Rukh Khan); the Gold medal at the 2003 Afro-Asian Games; the Gold medal in the 2004 Hockey Asia Cup; and a Silver medal at the 2006 Commonwealth Games. The team out shone the men so much that they were popularly referred to as the "golden girls of hockey" and slogans were raised such as *Jassi (Jasjeet Kaur) jaisi koi nahi* or "there's no one like Jasjeet", as 16-year-old Jasjeet, the youngest promising player, scored both in the semi-finals and finals.

Further, going down in the history of hockey, India became the first winner of the women's Champion Challenge II in 2009. During the 2014 Asian Games, the women's team won the

Bronze medal, while the men's team took Gold (after 16 years/last won 1998) and qualified for the 2016 Rio Olympics, and in same year won Silver medal at the Commonwealth Games. So also after thirty six years of gap (last featured in 1980 Moscow Olympics), the women's hockey team qualified for Rio Olympics.

Throughout the glory of Indian sports, adivasis of Chhotanagpur have a special place in Indian hockey. Right from the days of Jaipal Singh Munda, who led India in the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics and took the first ever Gold medal for the country. In fact it was Asia's first Olympic Gold medal. He was the first Indian student to be conferred the 'Oxford Blue' (an award conferred on athletes) by Oxford University for his contribution to hockey (as an Oxford student, he captained the Indian team).

Carrying forward his legacy, several top tribal players have become champions, like Michael Kindo; Arjuna Awardee, Bronze medal winner at the 1972 Olympics, and the 1975 World Cup; Manohar Topno, who played in the 1984 Olympics; Gopal Bhengra, Vincent Lakra, John Kerketta and Sylvanus Ddungdung, who all played in the 1978 World Cup; Ajit Lakra, who played in the 1992 World Cup; Dilip Turkey, national team captain and Arjuna and Padma Shree Awardee, who played in the 1996, 2000, and 2004 Olympics, and the 1998, 2002, and 2006 World Cups; Lazarus Barla, who played in the 2000 Olympics, and the 1998 and 2002 World Cups, and was also the youngest Indian to win Asian hockey Gold; Ignace Turkey, who played in the 2002 and 2006 World Cups, and was the 2009 Arjuna and 2010 Padma Shree Awardee; Prabodh Turkey, who played in the 2006 World Cup; Birendra Lakra, who played in the 2012 Olympics, the 2012 Test Series, the 2012 Champions Trophy, the 2011 Champions Challenge Tournament, the 2009 Youth Olympics, the 2009 Junior World Cup, and the Hockey

India League-Ranchi Team; and many others who have played for the country.²

Tribal girls from Chhotanagpur have had a presence in the women's national hockey team, ever since the 1990s. If we look at the names of the national team, we find some from Punjab, Haryana, and a few from other states, but a large number of girls from the tribal regions of Odisha, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh. Some of them include Jyoti Sunita Kullu (Arjuna Awardee, Captain), Anarita Kerketta, Hana Nag, Yesmani Sanga, Dayamani Soy, Savitri Purty (Sr player, Coach), Sukro Sanga, Pushpa Topno, Biswasi Purty, Gloria, Alma Guria, Rajkumari Banra, Pushpa Pradhan, Sumrai Tete (Captain), Sabita Ekka, Ursela Toppo, Goreti Turkey, Adeline Kerketta, Jyoti Kujur, Mukta Xalxo, Masira Surin, Fardina Ekka, Bimla Kujur, Mary Stella Turkey, Kanti Baa, Subhadra Pradhan, Asunta Lakra (Captain), Poonam Toppo, Premshila Kujur, Marita Turkey, Sushma Kiran Minz, Sushila Lakra, Fulmani Soy, Amrita Minj, BinitaXess, Sarita Lakra, Binita Toppo, Guddi Kumari, Neelima Kujur, Anjana Barla, Ranjita Barla, Sarita Hembrom, Reena Kanti Ekka, Rosalin Dung Dung, Suniti Kispotta, Mukta, Poonam Barla, Helen Soy, Agnesia Lugun, Paulina Surin, Aerrita Toppo, Annarita Kerketta, Shahina Kispotta, Sumitra Turkey, Anita Ekka, Deep Grace Ekka (Captain, junior team), Namita Toppo, Sunita Lakra, Lilima Minz, Anupa Barla and many others in Junior team like Kanti Pradhan, Subhasi Hembrom, Rajni Soreng, Rinki Kujur, Rashmita Minz, Ashmita Barla, Anima Minz, Sonal Minz, and others.³

As naturally gifted players, these girls mostly come from poor families and rural villages. Basic things such as running water, electricity, roads, transportation systems, proper education, and health care centers are not common, let alone sports facilities. Such adverse situations would lead anyone to wonder what their secret to success is. The answer, simply, is

that hockey flows in their blood!

Among adivasis, hockey has traditionally been played both by girls and boys in their villages as a recreational game. Although no one really knows its exact origin, many elders say that they picked it up from the Christian missionaries who came to their villages centuries earlier. Back then, it was a recreational game played with curved bamboo or a bent stick, and a ball made out of melted plastic items.

Typically, every village had, or still has, a common sports ground primarily for hockey, football, and more lately for cricket. In Sundargarh district of Odisha, many villages or associations host annual *Khasi* (Goat) tournaments, where some 15-20 teams participate in a month-long hockey festival. The prizes are often a goat (first prize), a pig (second) and a cock (third). The winning team is received with a grand welcome ceremony usually involving traditional dance, and garlands prepared by the young girls, women and children of the respective villages.

Even today, all the prizes won throughout the year are raised together, and slaughtered and served during the annual village picnic. Many children thus develop an interest and naturally pick up hockey by watching their elders. Even toddlers are sometimes found playing with a normal stick and a *sarifa* (raw custard apple) as a ball.

Secondly, nature-focused culture and lifestyle, community life, traditional food, physical activity etc. are an integral part of tribal culture and existence. Adivasis have always had a high regard for group work and unity: *madhuwa* (group work), *sajha* (sharing things, or physical work), *ban shikar* (group hunting), *akhra nach* (center for group dance), etc. are just some of the symbols of unity. This team spirit helps to build up speed, alertness and coordination. Their traditional chain dance itself

is an example: the leader starts the dance steps with the rhythm of the drum, pulling the chain forward. Typically, both men and women dance holding each other arms or shoulders, and if anyone is unable to coordinate the steps, it can break the sequence of the dance. Traditional dance is the very breath of their life rather than a form of entertainment. As Indian scholar Dr. Ram Dayal Munda once said, “*Je Naachi, Se Bachi*”, meaning “those who will dance will survive” or “dance to survive”. In the context of tribal traditional dance another saying in Kurukh goes, “*kattha dim dandi, aur ekna dim nalna*” meaning “their speaking is their song and their walking is their dance.”

Even though these hockey heroes continue to uphold the heritage of Indian hockey and aspire to bring back its glory days, administrative and government apathy towards hockey has killed the sporting talent of many in India. The apathy is, among other things, reflected in poor training facilities, food and accommodation and travel and security arrangements for the female players. For example, 16-year-old Karisma Sonkar, a class 10 student and a national-level hockey player from Pilibhit, U.P. was recently reported missing for five days when returning home alone by train after participating in an Under-17 National School Hockey Championship in Ranchi.⁴ In an effort to support themselves, four national players recently opened a joint bank account in Bhopal through which to seek monetary donations from the public.⁵ Half of the players have a job to support themselves and the juniors mostly go penniless. With this shoddy treatment, how can the country or its people expect great achievements?

Amidst this grim picture, however, we have much to cheer as we celebrate these real '*Chak De India*'⁶ girls and their achievements...

Endnotes:

1. *Hindustan Times*, 2 August 2012. Also available at <http://www.deccanherald.com/clontent/268727/in-rti-reply-centre-says.html>
2. The list comprises names collected from the sports center in Bangalore, Bhubaneswar and the Delhi-based Hockey Association of Chhotanagpur Tribals, also available at www.tribalhockey.org.
3. Ibid.
4. *The Indian Express*, 13 January 2015
5. *Times of India*, 21 January 2010
6. *Chak De* is a commonly used term in India usually connected with sports to cheer up the players. It can be loosely translated as “go on to win it”, “prove it”, “come on India”. This is also particularly used for elevating hockey in India, and with reference to the popular Bollywood film *Chak De! India*.

[11]

SUMRAI TETE, JYOTI SUNITA KULLU, ASUNTA LAKRA The Real 'Chak De India' Girls



“We should never be afraid of speaking the truth. We are no less than others”

SUMRAI TETE was the first tribal captain of the Indian Women's Hockey Team from the state of Jharkhand. From 1995-2006, she was an integral part of the national team, leading it several times as Captain and Vice-Captain. After recording their historic first ever victory and winning Gold at the 2002 Manchester Commonwealth Games by defeating England (with a 3-2 win), the team went on to win the Afro-Asian Games in 2003, and the Asia Cup in 2004. Under the captainship of Sumrai, the team also won Silver at the Melbourne Commonwealth Games of 2006.

From 2011-2014, she worked as a coach for the Indian Women's Hockey Team. She now works for the South Eastern Railway, as office superintendent, and as a coach for the Indian Railways Club. She lives in Ranchi with her parents.

Sumrai was born into a Kharia family in Kashira, Meromtoli, a small village in the Simdega district of Jharkhand. She started playing hockey from a young age but never imagined that one day she would be on the Indian National Team. She says, "From childhood I had interest in hockey. Hockey had been played in our villages as part of recreation. My father, grandfather, and sisters, all played hockey."

Sumrai's parents were farmers and worked hard to send their daughters to school. She says, "The socio-economic status of our family was not very sound, we were very poor, went through lots of struggles but they never allowed us to feel that. They worked hard in the field to provide us education."

She went to boarding school at St. Teresa Balika Madhya Vidyalay, in Samsera. There her breakthrough came when she was selected for hockey training at Balika Krida Vidyalaya, Bariatu Center and she studied at the Government Girls High School, Ranchi. Steadily, through hard work, she made her first entry into the national camp and, showing her potential, she was selected for the junior national team and made her first international debut in a tournament in South Korea in 1995.

"I was very young. I was not nervous, but excited. My focus was only on the game, nothing else. It was a very good experience."

Thereafter, she went on many international tours. "Whenever I get into the ground, I give my 100%. Our seniors always assisted and guided us, so being with them I grew up with good experience. Food was never a problem for me even during the international trips, always I adjusted well."

In 1997, she was employed in the Indian Railways. At the same time, she also continued her graduation studies at the Gossner College, Ranchi. As the team was preparing for the Melbourne Commonwealth Games in 2006, a surprise announcement was made by Hockey India (previously known as Field Hockey) at a press conference. Sumrai was to be captain of the team. "I was surprised! Infact everyone was surprised! But all were happy."

Sumrai became the first tribal woman captain of the senior team, although there were also other senior and junior players like Savitri Purty, Helen Soy, Biswasi Purty etc.

"I said, 'How did it all happen?' I never expected to be a captain. I always focused on the game."

With the participation of 10 countries in the 2006 Commonwealth Games, reigning champions India lost to Australia (1-0) and secured a Silver medal. Eight leading adivasi players came together on the hockey field: Asunta Lakra (forward), Jyoti Sunita Kullu (forward), Sumrai Tete (mild fielder, captain), Nilima Kujur, Kanti Baa (full backs), Masira Surin, Subhadra Pradhan (mid-fielder), Sarita Lakra (mid-fielder). Although the Gold medal was won by Australia, India was the only team to score against Australia (2 goals) in the entire tournament.¹

After returning home, Sumrai resumed her studies and also recovered from her injuries. After a month's rest, she was on to her next triumphs in the upcoming World Cup and other tournaments. Interestingly, amidst her continuous tours, training camps and work, she never compromised on her studies. She used to carry books during her travel and training but could not afford much time for studies due to a hectic schedule. Nonetheless, the Silver-winning Sumrai managed to obtain her B. A. degree.

From 2011-14, she was the coach for the national team, and

now continues to coach for the Indian Railways Club. During the 11 years of her career on the national team, she had the opportunity to lead the team in various capacities. While playing and being the captain, Sumrai proved her caliber through her excellent performance. As she says,

“Captaincy never adversely affected my performance at anytime. After losing in a few tournaments, I was under some pressure but once I am on the hockey field, I give it my full. We all start playing our natural ways, and we overcome the situations.”

Sumrai has nearly 200 international caps (number of games played) from playing in more than 30 international tournaments. However, her aspiration to be nominated for an Arjuna Award has not materialized because the world of hockey, like all other sports in India, is immersed in favoritism and political influence. As she says,

“I don't want this award on mercy, but based on my performance and credibility.”

Recently her Gold medal was stolen from her home. The police were unable to recover it and forwarded the case to the Court, which shows the serious apathy of the police and administration towards national heroes who happen to be tribals.



JYOTI SUNITA KULLU was born on 10 September 1978 into a Kharia tribal family, with farmer parents from Kusumdegi, Sundargarh district, northwestern Odisha. While in school she was selected for hockey and was trained at Panposh Sports Hostel, Rourkela and later by the Hockey Academy in Kapurthala, Punjab. She made her international debut for the country in 1996 at the Indira Gandhi International Gold Cup. In 2002, she became the top scorer of the Champions Challenge tournament in Johannesburg, South Africa, with five goals in six matches. Her prominent achievements include the 1998 Bangkok Asian Games (Silver), 2002 Manchester Commonwealth Games (Gold), 2002 Champions Challenge (Bronze), 2003 Afro-Asian Challenge (Gold), 2004 Asia Cup title, 2006 Commonwealth Games (Silver) etc. She captained the team for the 2006 Doha Asian Games and became flag bearer of the Indian contingent for the Opening Ceremony, winning Bronze for India by scoring five goals.

During her long career, Sunita became a World Qualifier and an Olympic Qualifier four times each. As a prolific scorer and most accomplished international hockey player, she was given the Arjuna award by the Government of India on 29 August 2007,

received from the country's first woman President Smt. Pratibha Devisingh Patil. However, confident in her performance, she feels the award came to her very late, and should have been presented earlier.²

She has played in more than 170 international tournaments and is married to Albert Tete, who is also a hockey player. While she continues to work and play for Indian Railways, she has also committed herself to promoting hockey and grooming budding players from rural villages of northwestern Odisha by being a trainer and Vice President of Hockey Gangpur. This unique association has been formed and is run by former senior players such as Dilip Tirkey (President), Ignace Tirkey (President), Prabodh Tirkey, William Khalkho and Subadhra Pradhan as joint secretaries and other. Affiliated to Hockey India,³ it is the second organization in the state (Odisha) with its own team, for both men and women (mostly tribal players), and it is able to take part in all national championship tournaments.

To this day, Sunita Kullu remains an inspiration to many young boys and girls from the region by creating interest and inspiring them to join the sport and bring cups home to the country. This is reflected in outstanding performances by junior players such as Deep Grace Ekka (captain, junior team), Sunita Lakra, Namita Toppo, Lilima Minz, Anupa Barla, Poonam Barla etc. who have all excelled in many international tournaments in recent years, playing against the top-ranked *countries* of the world.



ASUNTA LAKRA played in the Jr. World Cup [2005], Sr. World Cup and Commonwealth Games twice, participated in the Asia Cup twice and has over 110 international caps to her name.

Born in a small village of Nongada, Simdega, Jharkhand to farmer parents, she left no stone unturned in her efforts to be a national player. She is known as the “Daughter of the Soil” and “Symbol of Tribal Hope”.⁴

Asunta is the younger sister of international hockey heroes Bimal Lakra, Birendra Lakra and Binay Lakra (who passed away in 2008). Hockey was the most popular game played in Simdega. She grew up watching her father and brothers in *Khasi* tournaments (where a goat is given as a prize). Her father, Marcus Lakra, who also played at district level, wanted his children to excel at hockey, so he put mortgaged some of their land to meet their basic needs. Asunta's formative years of training took place at Bariatu hockey hostel in Ranchi.

This girl, who started playing hockey with a bamboo stick and *sarifa* (custard apple as ball) as a child, made her debut with a bang when she became a part of the Indian under-18 girls team that lifted the Asia Cup in 2000.

There were days, however, when it was difficult even to pay her hostel fees regularly. Asunta used her brother's old hockey stick and shoes for practice, even though a lack of good shoes can lead to injuries on astroturf. After a few years of literally stepping into the shoes of her celebrity brothers, she went one step further by becoming the captain of the national team.

Her brothers always guided and reminded her of the qualities that made her a unique player. There was no shortcut to her success, however, as she says, "One has to work hard if one wants to accomplish success in any sphere of life. Whoever reaches the state or national level today, does so all alone. There are plenty of talents in every pocket of Simdega, her native land, but they need to be groomed in the right way. The only silver lining is that hockey is still a way of life in my home district."⁵

In November 2014, she announced her retirement from international hockey and married Jayant Kerketta, also a hockey player. She now works at the Indian Railways and is a member of the Hockey India Executive Board and Vice President of Hockey Jharkhand. In March 2015, Hockey India felicitated Asunta by constituting the "Asunta Lakra Award" for Upcoming Player of the Year (under 21) in her name at its first annual Hockey India award ceremony in New Delhi. In August 2015, she was appointed the coach for the junior women's team, and she is grooming the young players for the upcoming 7th Women's Junior Asia Cup 2015 scheduled for September, in Changzhou, China. Asunta, now in her 30s, has taken a special interest in developing young players from her home town of Simdega by facilitating training and infrastructure development and boosting the district's hockey association.

However, for now, Asunta remains the last prominent tribal women's hockey player in the senior team from Jharkhand. There is an urgent call for tribal hockey to restore its former

glory and take India to the pinnacle of success in hockey by encouraging talent, developing infrastructure and severing unhealthy political influence.

The national game has to be above monetary gain and commercialization. It must be truly free from political interference and malpractices such as nepotism and cultural bias. As the lifting of the ICC World Cup championship brings pride and honour to all of us as Indians, so does the winning of Olympic trophies, Asian Games or Commonwealth Games by Hockey India.

Endnotes:

1. Interview with *The Telegraph*, 2 December 2014
2. *Outlook*, August 10, 2007 <http://www.outlookindia.com/news/article/arjuna-award-came-too-late--says-jyoti-sunita-kullu/494712>
2. *The Indian Express*, May 11, 2015
3. Asunta Lakra, a symbol for tribal hope, Times News Network, Feb 6, 2012 available at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/sports/hockey/top-stories/Asunta-Lakra-a-symbol-for-tribal-hope/articleshow/11772062.cms>
4. Simdega lives to play hockey, *The Telegraph*, December 2, 2014

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<http://www.bharatihockey.org>
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<http://www.asiahockey.org>
<http://www.sportsauthorityofindia.nic.in>
<http://yas.nic.in>

[The stories of Sumrai Tete, Jyoti Sunita Kullu and Asunta Lakra are based on literature review, personal interactions, and interviews as the author comes from the same region]

GLIMPSES OF HOCKEY IN CHHOTANAGPUR



Winners of Khasi Tournament being felicitated by the villagers where a goat (1st), a pig (2nd) & a chicken (3rd) is given as prize



Photo: from the FB wall of Sundargarh RURAL Hockey Olympiad

Inauguration of a tournament with traditional dance organized by Sundargarh Rural Hockey Olympiad



Women and children enjoying the tournament under rain. They are also selling local snacks to the audience



Children playing on mud ground



Children playing on roadside with normal bamboo sticks



A little girl trying with the stick



Grooming the young players at Simdega, Jharkhand

Photo source: FB wall, Hockey Simdega



Future of Indian hockey at Simdega, Jharkhand

PURNA MALAVATH [2006-] World's Youngest Woman Mt. Everest Conqueror



"For a girl like me, the Everest was not even close to my dreams. I would like to tell all the students to not give up, never fear the unknown and strive to achieve what you dream of."

In April 2014, just a few days after Purna Malavath and her team arrived at the Mount Everest base camp (17,000 feet) on the Northeast ridge or the North Col (Tibetan side), 16 sherpas, most of whom were experienced mountaineer guides, were killed in an avalanche on South Col (the Nepalese side). This is regarded as the second deadliest disaster in the history of Everest after the 25 April 2015 earthquake that hit Nepal.

While most climbers attempt Everest from the south side (29,029 ft), Purna took the most challenging route (Tibetan side, 29,035ft) as it was familiar to her trainer and they were trained accordingly. Moreover, the Nepalese Government does not allow climbers under sixteen on the south side. The Grand Dame of all Everest statistics, Ms Elizabeth Hawley, reports on

the Himalayan database that the total number of people who have scaled Mt. Everest as of February 2014 is around 6,871.¹ While the south side (Nepal) remains more popular, with 4,416 summits, the north (Tibet) has 2,455 summits.² Since the first ascent by Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay in 1953, over 250 people have died and disappeared, mostly due to avalanches, injury from fall, ice collapse, altitude sickness with heart attack, fatigue etc. In other words, it is never an easy climb!

In the 52 days of trekking on snow and rocks, in the freezing temperature and icefall, passing through ladder bridges and blustering winds, Poorna saw six dead bodies, but it did not deter her from scaling the peak. At 6 am, on 25 May 2014, just one month shy of 14 years old, Poorna set a record as the world's youngest woman to conquer Mt. Everest –the earth's highest peak.

Born on 6 October, 2006 in Pakala, a remote tribal hamlet in the Nizamabad district of the newly-created Telengana state, Poorna Malavath is a groundbreaker and pioneer. She belongs to the Lambadi or Lambada community, also known as Banjara³ or nomadic tribes, living throughout India. Her parents, Malavath Devidas and Laxmi, are agricultural labourers. Her brother Naresh is pursuing a polytechnic course and also wants to follow his sister and scale Mt. Everest one day.

Poorna's journey began at the government-run Andhra Pradesh Social Welfare Residential Educational Institutions Society (APSWREIS), when she joined in class 6 in 2010. She was selected from among 150 children (of APSWREIS's 99 schools in the state) for adventure sports as part of the society's initiative to promote excellence in the students. Brilliant in studies and extracurricular activities, she seized this opportunity after undergoing a four-stage screening test. First, under the guidance of Mr. Paramesh and B. Shekhar Babu, the students were given initial training in rock climbing, skill and confidence

development by the Rock Climbing School, Bhongir, Nalgonda, run by the Govt. of Telengana in association with Transcend Adventures Pvt. Ltd.

Eventually only 20 students were short listed from the screening test and sent to Darjeeling Himalayan Mountaineering Institute (HMI), in North Bengal for a 20-day course. Mr. Paramesh recalled that when the Director of HMI saw the children he said,

“What? You brought kids!” Mr. Paramesh replied, “They have sufficient stamina, energy and courage to accomplish the task. They have been tested and found to be fit physically and mentally.”⁴

The age limit to take the mountaineering training was 18, but the trainers had obtained special permission for their students, who were all between the ages of 13 and 17. Mr. Paramesh entered into an agreement with the institute that if his students failed to meet their expectations on reaching Bakhim (first camp), they could be sent back. Clearly, this did not happen.

After the final selection, nine students were sent to Ladakh in Jammu Kashmir for a winter expedition in temperatures of minus 30-40 degrees. They were given physical fitness training with exercise, meditation, yoga, regular jogging of 20-25km, ice rafting, rock rafting and more. They were trained and tested on their endurance levels at various temperatures and altitudes.

Poorna grew up in a warm and humid region. Although never exposed to such a cold climate previously, she acclimatized quickly during her training. Given her mental and physical fitness, she also received an 'A' grade on the Mt. Renock (17,000ft) expedition in the Kanchenjunga Range of the Himalayas.

Later in an interview with NDTV, Mr. Shekar Babu said, “I was quite amazed at their quick progress. It started with adventure training to improve personality and build confidence. But once the activities started, we saw something amazing. These children have a hidden energy that they themselves didn't know about. We started working on it. They started gaining confidence; their entire personality changed. We realized these guys can really do wonders.”⁵

After three months of training and preparation, Poorna and Anand (18-year-old dalit boy) were finally set for the Everest expedition. Dr. R. S. Praveen Kumar, then Secretary of APSWREIS, had personally followed up their training and the paperwork to obtain a permit. Poorna charmed the liaison officers of the China-Tibet Mountaineering Association, who all insisted on taking pictures with her. Even before she started her ascent, they said that she was going to “break the world record!”

Climbing the world's highest peak from the north side was not going to be an easy task, however. They were trained accordingly. As Mr. Sekhar said, “I knew each and every challenge. Inch by inch of the route was familiar to me.” Sekhar is said to be the first Indian to climb Mt. Everest as an individual and was presented with the prestigious 'Tenzing Norgay National Adventure Award' in 2008 by the Government of India.

However, Poorna was aware of the toughness of scaling the mountain. Her backpack contained food packets, climbing ropes, sleeping bags, medicine, boots and, most importantly, her oxygen cylinder.

She had to be cautious of exposure, which could result in severe health risks such as frostbite or damage to the skin and other tissues such as burning, numbness, tingling and itching

caused by reduced blood flow and oxygen in the body. Experts warn that decreased amounts of snow on the ice and rocks can increase the chances of falling, while traffic jams and longer treks may result in a shortage of oxygen.

Certain places and ridges had to be climbed and crossed by ladder, which requires a high level of alertness. “If you are distracted for even one second, you could fall down hundreds of meters, and your body can never be recovered.”⁶

Despite the danger, it was definitely a breathtaking adventure for Poorna. During her climb through the biting cold, she battled against hard winds carrying her oxygen tank. She survived on small amounts of dehydrated food, which she said had a foul smell and was not easy to digest. “I frequently threw up whenever I was given food from those sealed bags as the smell was unbearable. I had to rely on soups which were served hot and didn't come in a packet.”⁷

After hearing about the avalanche and the tragic death of the sherpas, upon reaching base camp, Poorna was shocked and scared. On the way up, crossing through the area known as the “death zone”,⁸ she had seen dead bodies, an experience that would shock and sadden anyone.

But brave hearted Poorna said, “I regained my confidence by recalling the teaching of my mentor, parents and the Ten Commandments (Code of Conducts) of SWAEROES.” They are:

- i) I am not inferior to anyone,**
- ii) I shall be the leader wherever I am,
- iii) I shall do what I love and be different,
- iv) I shall always think big and aim high,
- v) I shall be honest, hardworking and punctual,
- vi) I shall never blame others for my failure,
- vii) I shall never beg nor cheat,

- viii) I shall repay what I borrow,
- ix) I shall never fear the unknown,
- x) I shall never give up.**⁹

The alumni of APSWREIS are known as SWAEROES, which stands for Social Welfare AEROES (in Greek, 'sky'); it means that the sky is the limit and there is no reverse gear, no looking back and no slowing down. SWAEROES never goes back. And every SWAEROES adheres to the Ten Commandments for life.

After seven and a half weeks, Poorna was the first to reach the summit on 25 May 2014, while Anand followed just behind. Together, they unfurled the Indian National Flag, a portrait of Dr. Ambedkar, father of the Indian Constitution and the messiah of the marginalized in India, a portrait of legendary bureaucrat the late S. R. Sankaran who created APSWREIS, and the flag of the new state of Telangana. “When I first saw the summit, I started running towards it. I just couldn't wait to fly my national flag. Once I reached the mountain top and looked around, the world suddenly seemed very small - I felt on top of the world,” she said.¹⁰

The mission did not, however, end there. The descent can be just as dangerous as the climb, and many die during the return journey.¹¹ It is more difficult to navigate while descending, as climbers cannot see the placement of their feet on the ladder rungs. This part of the journey is notorious for its long delays, thus increasing the chance of frostbite.

However, Poorna and her super hero team got down successfully.

It was dangerously tough, even for the fittest and most experienced of climbers. Many experienced mountaineers and experts said Poorna's ascent was a rare accomplishment at her age. Prior to Poorna's climb, Nepal's Ming Kipa Sherpa (in 2003 at the age of 15), and Nima Chemji Sherpa (in 2012 at the age of

16) could claim to be the youngest women to reach the summit. In 2010, just two months shy of 14 years old, American Jordan Romero claimed to have set the record of being the youngest to summit Everest. Even so, the fact that Poorna came from a socially backward background and managed the climb with just eight months of training was miraculous!

She said to the BBC, “The aim of my expedition was to inspire young people and students from my kind of background. For a tribal like me, opportunities are very rare and I was looking for one opportunity where I could prove my caliber.”¹²

Knowing the risks of the expedition, her parents did not want to send her but Poorna reassured them with her confidence that she would come back safely. Today her parents are confident that she can do anything in life and change their destiny.

Once unknown to the world, Poorna's village Pakala is now familiar to many. These days her village is popularly referred to as “Poorna Pakala”. Now, wherever Poorna goes, she gets a heroic welcome. Her school teachers in Tadwai residential school said that before she took up this expedition there was seemingly nothing extraordinary in her. She was a shy girl but now she can address any number of gatherings and the media.

Poorna wants to become an officer of the Indian Police Service and her role model is Dr. R.S. Praveen Kumar, the architect of this mission. For Dr. Praveen, it was not just about one inspiring story of individual excellence, it was about encouraging many more like Poorna to go on to achieve such feats. The son of a coolie himself, and from humble beginnings, he climbed the ladder of success step by step.

After becoming an Indian Police Service officer, Dr. Praveen asked the Chief Minister to post him to the position of Secretary of the APSWREIS. He wanted this opportunity to

shape the destiny of the thousands of underprivileged children who study in these schools. The students follow a well-designed daily curriculum of study and co-curricular activities. All the schools have banned the word “*dalit*”. As Dr. Praveen says, “We want to give children a sense of community and a new identity that they could be proud of. We don’t want children to get that tag and walk into the world. We gave them SWAERO -which means someone who will fly out into the sky and aim high.”¹³ Chief trainer Paramesh also went on to praise Poorna and the other students saying, “These children have natural ability, talent, endurance and energy endowed within them. This, perhaps, they inherit from the virility of their parents or it could be due to regular exercise and participation in sports and games in their schools.”¹⁴

Since its establishment in 1984, APSWREIS has produced thousands of brilliant students by providing a high-quality education to poor scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and other lower class students. To carry forward the legacy left by Jyothi Rao Phule and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and “to redefine the dalit dignity”, alumni set up the SWAEROES movement.

Poorna and Anand have set an example for the whole world and shown that, when given equal opportunities, underprivileged children can excel anywhere. As Nelson Mandela once said, “Poverty is not an accident. Like slavery and apartheid, it is man-made and can be removed only by the actions of human beings.”

Today, many children like Poorna are calling for an end to the prejudices and stereotypes attached to dalit and adivasis and that we can together renew the world around us so that every child can become Poorna.

End notes:

1. From the archives of American journalist and chronicler of Himalaya expedition Elizabeth Hawley available at <http://www.himalayandatabase.com/>
2. From the website of Alan Arnette, a Keynote Speaker, Mountaineer and Alzheimer's Advocate available at <http://www.alanarnette.com/everest/everest.php>
3. The Banjara people, a nomadic tribe, were used as goods transporters by the British colonial authorities, who brought the community under the purview of the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 as “thieves” or “habitual criminals”, and put restrictions on their movements. The stigma is still attached to the Banjara people who, even after Independence and the repeal of the Acts, come under the Habitual Offenders Act 1952. Discrimination, alienation and stereotyping of Banjaras by the media and police still continue.
4. Testimony of Paramesh, Chief trainer of Transcend Adventures, Hyderabad, published in *SWAEROES: An inter-house journal of APSW Residential School*, November 2013, p. 10.
5. From the archives of American journalist and chronicler of Himalaya expedition Elizabeth Hawley available at <http://www.himalayandatabase.com/>
6. After conquering Mt Everest, they dream of much more, available at <http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/after-conquering-mount-everest-they-dream-of-much-more-583848>
7. *The Times of India*, 18 June 2014.
8. In the death zone, the human body cannot acclimatize as it uses oxygen faster than it can be replenished. A number of horrific pictures taken by climbers can be found on various websites showing unrecovered corpses, frozen bodies, body parts being spread out, scattered bones and skulls, and stone tombs. Some died during their sleep while others were injured or fell unconscious and froze.

9. Poorna's statement at a felicitation ceremony in Hyderabad, available at <http://www.transadventures.com/videos>; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Telangana_Social_Welfare_Residential_Schools; <http://125.16.1.123/Samurai/activities.html>
10. http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/05/30/youngest-woman-climb-everest-malavath-purna_n_5395804.html
11. See, for example, a research analysis on death during Mt. Everest expeditions carried out by the Massachusetts General Hospital, USA, which shows that most of the deaths occur during the descent from the summit in the so-called "death zone" above 8,000 meters. *Why Climbers Die on the Mt Everest*. *Science Daily*, 15 December 2008 available at <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/12/081209221709.htm>
12. Youngest girl on Everest wants to be role model for tribal children, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-27599570>
13. Praveen Kumar: Officer on a dream mission available at http://www.civilsocietyonline.com/pages/HOF_Details.aspx?597
14. Statement by Shekhar Babu available at <http://www.transadventures.com/videos/>

[This story is based on literature review]

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Recently, I have been reading a number of publications on the life stories of so-called "successful" or "the most powerful" Indian women in corporate business, politics and other sector. Very often, the same women crop up time and again in the books. A year back, when I visited a book house in Bangalore, known to be India's largest book mall, I came across a book entitled "Women of Pure Wonder", stories of the struggle, survival and success of 60 women from different backgrounds who have met life's challenges with courage and have emerged winners. The books were sealed with a transparent plastic cover and I could neither flip through it nor afford to buy it. I later found it was a coffee table book produced by Vodafone Foundation and which was launched at the ITC Maurya, a five-star hotel in Delhi, at a glittering ceremony in the presence of many VIPs and celebrities. This incident led me to write this book, by collecting the life stories of grassroots heroes and making them available to all.

In this search, I discovered another book entitled "Dalit Millionaires", a collection of success stories of Dalit entrepreneurs who have braved both society's and business pressures to carve out highly profitable niches for themselves.

I was somewhat joyful to find the stories of two women. One was Kalpana Saroj, chairperson of Kamani Tubes, and recipient of Padmashree Award, who once earned just Rs 2/- (\$0.03) by stitching clothes but who, with her unlimited imagination and courage, became a millionaire, overcoming the trauma of child marriage, brutal torture by her husband and in-laws, rejection by her own family and society, and while fighting the land mafias. The other was Savitaben Parmar, a class-three educated mother of six children, who once sold coal on a small scale to support her family and today owns a factory manufacturing ceramic cups, plates and tiles and employing 200 people.

I wondered, even after 69 years of India's independence, why the tribal society had not been able to produce tribal icons in the field of politics, business, the media and entertainment, the health sector, science and technology etc.? And even if there are, why no one writes about them? It was in this context that I decided to “write our own stories”. I collected names and made a list of tribal personalities who have excelled and contributed in various fields and to nation building. I wanted to focus on stories of people who have struggled in life to achieve what they have. But I discovered that many of them come from socially and economically better off families (not having to struggle too hard), and that political leaders often continued a political lineage.

During this period of literary review, I came across many incidents of tribal revolts throughout India which had involved tribal women. This leadership quality is traditionally instilled in the tribal people, including women. They are leaders in their own ways, and they know the way, go the way and show the way. And this is reflected in the portrayed life stories. As tribal leader Dayamani Barla says, “Every woman is a leader, but not everyone gets opportunities for leadership. She fights against all sorts of situations in her life; beginning in the mother's

womb, within herself, her own family, hierarchical and patriarchal society and the political system of the country.”

In the name of 'development', the state has snatched away self-sufficiency, the land and resources, along with the cultural pride of indigenous peoples. Research shows that the world's richest billionaires are no happier than the average Maasai cattle herder of Africa.¹ The Dongria Kondh of Odisha grow more than 100 crops and harvest 200 different wild foods, providing them with year-round rich nutrition even in times of drought.² As Lodus Sikaka, a Dongria says, “It's crazy when these outsiders come and teach us development. Is development possible by destroying the environment that provides us with food, water and dignity? You have to pay to take a bath, for food, and even to drink water. In our land, we don't have to buy water like you, and we can eat anywhere for free”.³

India's history has become a part of Indian culture, blended with misconceptions about adivasi indigenous peoples' ethos and identities. We often fail to acknowledge that, in many aspects, indigenous peoples are modern in distinct ways, even though they may appear ancient from other considerations. They are not “primitive” but proud. They are not “backward” but have chosen to live in their own ways. As G. Thenadikulam of Wayand, Kerala says, “Our colour is good, our language is good, our art is good, and our way of living is good. If we can respect your religion and your practices, why can't you respect ours?”⁴

It is no longer acceptable to describe any people as 'primitive', a racist term which has been used to refer to tribal and indigenous peoples since the colonial era.⁵ It is worth noting that many Indian states include a large number of distinct indigenous communities, tribes and ethnic groups. They each possess a unique culture, language, literature, customs, tradition, ethnic identity and habitation. They should not,

however, be discriminated against on the basis of their colour or ethnicity. They are not mere 'Junglees', 'Paharis', 'Chinese' or 'Chinkis', as labelled by the people of the metropolitan cities of India, but are fully-fledged citizens of this country whose ancestors have sacrificed their lives and contributed enormously to building modern India. I hope this volume helps readers to understand and acknowledge indigenous peoples' cultural diversity, and their struggle for survival and recognition as equal citizens of the country.

This book, I believe, is the first of its kind and reveals the leading roles of tribal women in India, their existence in Indian history, both in past and modern contexts, and presents three generations of women leadership. These real heroes inspire us to believe in ourselves, to dream big, and never to back down until you have won. They have endured the most adverse life situations and became the torchbearers and springboard of hope for us all. I hope that this context will also create more space for future research and discourse.

Endnotes:

1. *Happy and Thrive*, available at <http://www.survivalinternational.org/not-primitive-info>
2. Ibid
3. Ibid.
4. Why Proud, Not Primitive?
<http://www.survivalinternational.org/not-primitive-info>
5. Ibid.
6. *Chinky* or *Chinkies* refers to single-fold eyelids and is a derogatory term that is mostly used for people from Northeast India, China or Nepal by people from mainland India. Due to recently reported growing incidents of racial discrimination and violence against migrants from Northeast India to various cities, the Ministry of Home Affairs made hate-speech such as "Chinky" punishable with five years in jail in 2011.

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