

# AIDWA



**NEWSLETTER-9**

**July-2021**

## **Editorial Communication**

Dear comrades, friends and well-wishers,

This number of our newsletter may seem to you to be reserved for memorials and indeed it is. In these disease-ridden days when many of us are losing close family members and relatives all on a sudden, some of our best and dearest comrades, our foremost activists are also being snatched away from us by this pandemic. We remember them with love and gratitude for their enrichment of our movement. It is no relief to us to recall that but for the inhuman callousness and mismanagement shown by the rulers of the country, some of these lives at least might have been saved; some of the dire distress might have been lessened. It is not enough to feel sorrow, but it moves us to anger to think that we are witnessing not mere inefficiency, but the inevitable results of totally unprincipled collusion between the government and its corporate cronies for a limited number of high-ups to earn super-profits out of the people's distress.

Only in turning this distress into anger shall we be able to appreciate in these our own times the example set for us in particular by two of our foremost leaders, each exceptional in her way, who had guided us since the early days of our organization. It is to these two, Mythily Sivaraman and Ranjana Nirula, whom we have lost recently, that we would like to pay special tributes in this number of our newsletter. I would only like to say here that while both Mythily and Ranjana had their distinctive contributions to our struggle, when one studies the trajectories of their activism from the early days, one finds some striking similarities between their lives as activists which also tell us something about the times in which they grew up as such.

Both of them had their initiation into political activism in the late 1960s while they were abroad, in the United States of America of all places! But America at that

time was seething with youth movements against the Vietnam War and for equal rights for Black Americans. The two we are talking about were drawn inexorably into these movements, but their experience brought them outside the ambit of the bright careers they might have made had they settled down there; instead they decided to return to the country of their birth which was itself on the threshold of great changes at the time and neither of them ever flinched from the decision to dedicate their lives to communist activism.

Both of them chose that battle-scarred political field which brings you to the understanding that the intolerable social conditions in which we find ourselves can change only when exploited working women and men are emancipated from their chains. When they were drawn into the women's movement too their earlier training as communist trade union organizers gave them that perspective into gender issues which sees emancipation of working people as a condition for genuine equality between men and women. In striving to bring justice to women, they taught AIDWA also to fight against the deeper social basis of injustice and inequality. Both were convinced of the importance of ideological work. When Mythily ran the organizational journal in Tamilnadu or enlivened the editorial board of *Women's Equality*, when Ranjana gave patient and meticulous leadership to the publication and dissemination of *The Voice of the Working Woman*, they saw it as part of crucial political work, the task of turning the distress of suffering women and men into dedicated anger against social inequality. Even when they are no more with us, we pledge to take that task forward.

**Malini Bhattacharya, President, All India Democratic Women's Association**

**A Silver Lining Among Dark Clouds: Delhi High Court's Order on  
Jailed Activists  
by Mariam Dhawale**

**A Tribute to Comrade Ranjana Nirula  
by Brinda Karat**

**My Mother, Comrade Mythily  
by K. Kalpana**

**COVID-19 Lays Bare Exploitation and Struggles of Domestic  
Workers  
by Satarupa Chakraborty**

*Women's Struggles across the World*  
**Palestine's Freedom and Palestinian Women's Liberation — One  
Cannot Happen without the Other  
by Surangya**

## ***A Silver Lining Among Dark Clouds: Delhi High Court's Order on Jailed Activists***

-Mariam Dhawale, General Secretary, AIDWA

Last month saw the emergence of a silver lining amidst the dark clouds hanging over our country for the last seven years. Three young students Natasha Narwal, Devangana Kalita and Asif Iqbal Tanha were released on bail on June 15 through a historic order by the Delhi High Court. They had been incarcerated in the Tihar Jail in Delhi for over a year under the draconian UAPA on the totally false charge of having incited the Delhi communal riots last year.



Their real 'crime' was that they had participated in the anti-CAA protests in Delhi and had supported the unprecedented Shaheen Bagh struggle by thousands of women. Many other students like them are still in jail, while those BJP leaders who actually incited the Delhi riots, like Anurag Thakur and Kapil Mishra, roam scot free.

Among the many memorable passages in the Delhi High Court judgment delivered by Justices Siddharth Mridul and Anup Bhambhani, are: "It appears that in its anxiety to suppress dissent and in the morbid fear that matters may get out of hand, the state has blurred the line between the 'right to protest' and 'terrorist activity'. If such blurring gains traction democracy would be in peril...Protests against governmental and parliamentary actions are legitimate; and...it is not uncommon for protesters to push the limits permissible in law...Considering, however, that the right to protest is a fundamental right that flows from the constitutionally guaranteed right to assemble peaceably and without arms enshrined in Article 19 (1)(b) of our

Constitution, surely the right to protest is not outlawed and cannot be termed as a 'terrorist act' within the meaning of the UAPA."

There was a wave of joy and relief across the country at the Delhi High Court judgment. Natasha's father Dr Mahavir Narwal, a prominent Left activist of the People's Science Movement, died of Covid in May and she was not given bail in time to even see her father alive for the last time. She went back to Tihar Jail after her three month parole was over on May 31.

The Delhi Police, which is directly under Union Home Minister Amit Shah, appealed against this judgment to the Supreme Court. While the Supreme Court declined to cancel the bail of the three students who had been set free, it nevertheless ruled that the Delhi High Court judgment would not be treated as a precedent when dealing with UAPA cases.

Hundreds more are languishing in jails in the last few years of the Modi regime in trumped up cases under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA), National Security Act (NSA) and the archaic Sedition Act of British colonial vintage. They include 16 women and men who are called the Bhima Koregaon detenus. Many of them - intellectuals and human rights activists who have been fighting consistently for the poor - are in jail for over three years.

Then there are several journalists, cartoonists and film makers who have been thrown into prison simply because they have been critical of the Modi-Shah-Yogi regime. One young woman film maker Aisha Sultana was recently booked under the Sedition Act for tweeting against the Lakshadweep administrator. Luckily, she was given anticipatory bail by the Kerala High Court.

June 26 this year was the 46th anniversary of the imposition of the Emergency by the then Congress government. Today what the country is facing is an undeclared Emergency under the BJP government. That day also marked the completion of seven months of the historic farmers' struggle in our country. The Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM) under whose banner that struggle goes on gave a nationwide call that day to 'Save Agriculture, Save Democracy'. The Central Trade Unions actively supported that call. So did AIDWA together with SFI and DYFI.

The struggle for democracy, sovereignty, secularism, federalism, economic, social and gender justice – values enshrined in our Constitution – are under attack as never before from the current central government. Let us defend these values with all our might! Let us strengthen the struggle to dispel the dark clouds and breathe under the open sky!

## *A Tribute to Comrade Ranjana Nirula*

-Brinda Karat, Patron, AIDWA

**[Transcription of a speech at the AIDWA Meeting Remembering Comrade Ranjana Nirula]**



Comrades from AIDWA in their tributes beautifully expressed the various aspects of our beloved and militant comrade Ranjana's life and contributions. I feel if Ranjana was alive today, she would have smiled and said, "Come on comrades, stop being sad!"

Ranjana faced all the ups and downs of life with great strength and courage. Today we are remembering Ranjana with such immense heaviness in our hearts also because she left us so suddenly. It is true that one day all of us have to die. But at least in such closure the ones who will be left behind get some time to prepare their minds and their hearts for the imminent departure of a loved one. Ranjana departed so suddenly. Such is the cruelty of this virus, no one knows when it will take someone away from us. That is what happened with Ranjana; she left us within two weeks.

We all knew Ranjana had been ill for some time. For the last six months, she had been making the rounds of hospitals. She was suffering from Crohn's disease. But those of us talking to her regularly felt she was recovering, her health was getting better. Strength was returning to her voice. Her laughter was becoming what it used to be. Her political commentary, jokes, humour-- there was hope to see all of it

again as Ranjana was getting stronger just in the past month or so after she returned to her sister Meena's home for her recovery. But this did not happen.

Today I do not want to recount the events of the last two weeks. Doctors did all that they could. But there is one thing I want to share with all comrades here. Since I and comrade Sindhu were in regular contact with her in her last days, I want to tell you that Ranjana left us with great strength and dignity.

Everything that you know and have said about Ranjana's life, all these stories and realities we will tell the coming generations as well. In the message Ranjana's elder sister posted on her Facebook remembering her, she has written a sentence, "Live life to the fullest!" Indeed if we look at Ranjana's life, we can say with happiness that she lived her life to the fullest. Not just for herself, for her family, for her niece and nephew, for her sister Meena's daughter Mini. The presence of Mini, a child with special needs, compelled Ranjana to work with disabled children seeing that there are no good provisions for those with such needs in our country.

Because of this love she had for her family, for her friends, she had a huge circle of friends who loved her immensely. If she had wanted, she could have spent her life with just these close relations. But the path that she chose for her life followed an ideology. Ranjana changed the course of her life through her commitment to the ideas of Marxism, by being inspired by the ideas of socialism, and her dreams of living up to the ideals of communism.

All of us here know, particularly women, that this is a difficult path; it is not a straightforward path. If we do not keep our focus constantly on the destination of this path, and merely count the milestones, we will come to a halt. Ranjana always remained focused on the destination, on that dream, on the immediate need of the revolution.

To achieve this, Ranjana decided to fight against the exploitation of the working class and the rule of capitalism. She brought this theory into practice, in how she lived her life. We saw this in Ranjana and in all her qualities. Of course, all good human beings have such qualities, it is not necessary they be communists.

But a communist is committed to practicing this, to being selfless. The life of a communist such as Ranjana is not spent on doing charity or welfare, but in fundamentally changing the structure of society.

I remember, back in early 70s, just before the Emergency, comrade Kitty Menon who was a professor in Delhi University and lived in Vithalbai Patel House at the time, used to conduct classes on Marxism about once a week. Many used to attend those classes; Ranjana was among them. Comrade Kitty played a major role in inculcating Marxist ideas to those generations. Starting from there, Ranjana took those Marxist ideas to heart and spent her life practicing them.

I will emphasize again what other comrades here have said rightly before me. When we talk about social exploitation in our country, be it on the basis of gender or caste, we need to analyze it together with class exploitation for our struggle to be correct.

At the time, all of us belonging to that particular generation took great inspiration from the Vietnam War. The class question was of utmost importance to us. Today, of course, it is urgent to understand the sophistication of identity politics. But back then, we began our struggle with a strong class approach in a place like Delhi, where democratic mass movements are so weak. In such conditions, Ranjana paved her own path by joining the working class and their struggles. She also closely looked at the role of women in the class struggle against capitalism.

I remember when the Delhi unit of AIDWA first met, there were eleven of us. Ranjana was also there. In the discussions that were held that day, one conclusion emerged clearly: the women's movement has to play a role in accordance with the voice of the working class. Since all of us were associated with trade unions, the Left women's movement emerged in Delhi as a part of the working class movement in colonies where workers lived.

The democratic women's movement in Delhi was a result of the confluence of the student's movement on the one hand, and the trade unions on the other. Ranjana played a major role in this as she worked directly with workers, with the families of workers in working class localities. From the beginning to her last day, Ranjana remained closely linked with the Delhi unit of AIDWA. On the basis of this relationship, she was closely linked to the national level women's movement.

There were many debates before AIDWA could exist in its current form as a national level organization. The organization had to accommodate the collective experiences of all its state units. Except comrade Mallu Swarajyam, none of the founders are alive among us today. Ranjana was among the next generation of AIDWA those who now hold the positions of office-bearers, CEC members, etc. Among those as well, Shyamalidi is no longer with us today. Mythili is right now suffering from COVID. [Mythily Shivaraman passed away on May 30, a week after this meeting was held to remember Ranjana]

There is a preamble which decides an organisation's ideology, its policies, and the direction it takes. However, I have never believed, and Ranjana would have heartily agreed with me on this, that this preamble is set in stone and cannot change. Ranjana had the capability to understand new challenges that come with changing times. It is an organisation's strength to be able to assess the changing situation and accordingly, decide what new steps need to be taken. Ranjana had this skill.



We cannot just rely on our old dreams and ideas. They are our legacy, but not so that they become a burden. They are our legacy because we can learn from them what challenges stand before our movement. Understanding that is a major responsibility that has to be carried out by the members of a communist organization, and Ranjana did just that.

Throughout the pandemic as well, Ranjana understood the importance of healthcare and the task of ASHA workers and issued multiple memoranda on their working conditions. She worked on how young women can be involved more in organizational work, and she got them involved.

People tell us, you communists are out-dated, you need to change your thinking. No. We don't give up on the basic tenets and ideals of communism. We do, however, adapt with the changing conditions and give our movement a new direction accordingly. At every turn, Ranjana understood what the movement needed. Today, our primary fight is against the Hindutva forces led by BJP-RSS. Ranjana was the working editor of The Voice of the Working Woman [the journal brought out by the Coordination Committee of Working Women]. In issues spanning the last few years, you can see how well the dangers that BJP-RSS pose against women and the working class have been articulated. Ranjana had a clear understanding of this. Today, it is essential for us to formulate how to take this understanding ahead. Even here, Ranjana was clear, that without class struggle, these right-wing Hindutva forces cannot be defeated.

From her role in JMS, and in AIDWA, and her role in CITU, we can see how she tried to understand the changing conditions, and how according to these changes she along with others tried to plan the path ahead.

I would like to mention another point here. Ranjana fervently opposed every manifestation of male chauvinism. Sometimes even I tried to tell her to approach the situation a little differently, but she would refuse and say, we do not need to be tactful here. She would insist that if in such matters, our position is not absolutely clear, we cannot clear the path for others who would face the same challenges tomorrow.

We always believed that just as revolutionaries before us have created a path for us, we can do the same only if we speak out on certain questions loudly and without any compromise. Ranjana would always speak out, properly but without any compromise on her politics. She could do this because she was never seeking any position of power. She would always stand by her rules, her principles and her thoughts. That is who she was.

All of you in your personal capacity have spoken about the crucial role played by her in building cadres. Within Delhi, so many of our comrades have worked and learnt with Ranjana and have continued to stand with the red flag despite

challenges and difficulties. It is undeniable that Ranjana had a major contribution in that.

When it comes to personal relationships, all of you share close memories with her. You got little time to share those memories here today, but such is the reality of these online meetings. However, her memories cannot be restricted to this meeting today. Whenever we get the opportunity to meet and talk, Ranjana will always be a part of those conversations.

The relationship I shared with her was one of ups and downs. Before I came to Delhi in 1975, I met Ranjana at Comrade Kitty's home for the first time on one of my visits to the city. When I moved to Delhi as per the Party's instructions, I began my work in the trade union movement, in the women's movement. In our shared work in these different committees, our experiences and debates, there also used to be contention, sometimes there was even harshness. But that never created a wall in our relationship.

It is my understanding that through this journey, we began to understand each other better and our relationship was only strengthened. Relationships with all party comrades are strong, of course. After all, what more of a family do we have if not our comrades? But additionally, there are personal relationships as well, and in the last 20-25 years, the bond Ranjana and I shared got strong and close. Everything that you all have shared before me about the qualities you saw in Ranjana, I saw those as well.

After she was admitted to the hospital, on the second day we had a long conversation over the phone. She was very cheerful. She told me, Brinda, you say we have known each other for the last 50 years, but actually I have known you since my college days. She was my senior in college, she studied in IP College, I was in Miranda House. She recounted that Nina's cousin lived in Nizamudin and she often used to go there. This cousin was my roommate. So we often used to take the same bus. Ranjana would get off at her college and I would get off at mine. I did not remember this, but that day Ranjana reminded me of this and said, I have known you since then.

We were old friends. We have an old friendship and in that friendship, there was also a lot of laughter, a lot of humour. There were Ranjana's jokes, her sharp political comments. Most importantly, there was a lot of her love.

Ranjana and I had a code - 'noon day sun.' It used to baffle other people. Ranjana and I were then in Faridabad as part of a small women's group, campaigning against dowry. It was noon and the sun was harsh on our heads. There was not one person to be seen to witness our campaign. But we were so passionate, loudly sloganeering, our voices reaching the sky, our fists raised. Then suddenly, I and

Ranjana halted, looked to each other and burst into laughter. Ranjana said, there is nobody else here, only communists, only us mad women.

When we decide to embark upon a new path, we need some amount of craziness. Without it, we cannot counter society's cruelty. In that harsh noonday sun, Ranjana also had her fun. She spent her life with the same objective and for the same dream, truly living up to Meena's description, "Live life to the fullest!" We are happy that Ranjana, our dearest comrade, did live life to the fullest, as a communist, for her ideals, for her goals, and gave so much love to all those who came in contact with her.

We will miss her. We shall always remember her. She is now part of the history of AIDWA, of working class movements in Delhi, of ASHA movements and scheme workers movements across India, and of course, always as part of the legacy of our beloved red flag.

Red salute, Ranjana.

Lal Salaam!

## *My Mother, Comrade Mythily*

-K. Kalpana

[K. Kalpana, daughter of Comrade Mythily Shivaraman, is associate professor at IIT, Chennai. This is an abridged version of her article written on January 11, 2015 and first published by *Newslick*. The full article is now in our archives.]



One of the oldest memories I have of my childhood is of my mother seated at her typewriter, of hearing the familiar clickety-clack it made and of waiting at her side for her to finish a line, so that I could re-turn the lever that would allow her to move to the next. For me, it was as natural to see my mother speak at a public meeting as it was to watch her type, write or argue, and have night-long discussions with the many friends and comrades who frequented our home.

I grew up with the sense of an open home. Assorted young friends of my mother, *annas* and *akkas* to me, visited all the time, often showing up late at night after I had fallen asleep so that I would wake up to find them sleeping in the sofa in our hall. In the *mottai maadi* (top floor balcony) of our old house, amma's comrades would sit in a circle and rehearse a *madhar sangam* song as I pedalled around them in my blue tricycle. I recall my mother's gentle voice singing '*madhar sangam, ladies clubbu yaarukkaga? Thozhi, yarukkaga? Unnai pola, yennai pola,*

*pennukaaga* (The madhar sangam, the ladies club, who is it for? Comrade, who is it for? For a woman like you, for a woman like me)'.

I came to see that my mother was an unusual woman not (only) because of what she did in the world outside or as part of her 'office' work. She conveyed to me her strong aversion for women's supposedly natural love for silk sarees, fine clothes and gold jewellery. Her bare dressing table at home reflected her resolve to wear cotton sarees at family weddings and not buy or own a single piece of gold.

One particular summer morning, I woke up late to hear my friend next door (and co-resident of our large compound with many families) shouting, "Come see – Mythily aunty is speaking into a mike!" I rushed to the window to find her standing on top of a makeshift drum and hollering into a mike in the auto stand just outside our house. All my neighbourhood playmates and their parents were glued to their windows gaping at the strange sight. I realised that it was May 1 and that she was delivering the rousing 'May Day' greetings to the auto drivers and others who had gathered. As the drum kept shaking, I kept praying that she would not fall and embarrass me even more.

Another day when I was getting ready for school, we heard a commotion from outside. Women from the Jagannathapuram slum behind our residence had suddenly and spontaneously gathered with their empty water pots to stage a 'water protest' on the main road. Even as the traffic policemen wielding their *lathis* tried to disperse them, my mother, who was combing and plaiting my hair, dropped the hair-brush and ran out of our house shouting, "*Nadu roadliye utkaarunga! Busu poga vidatheenga! Kalaiyatheenga!* (Sit in the middle of the road! Don't let the buses go! Do not disperse!)."

One late evening, I remember my furious mother calling the police commissioner's office to demand that he immediately order the release of a woman, a domestic maid in a neighbour's home, who had been detained illegally in the police station. "Don't the police know that a woman cannot be detained overnight?" she harangued him on the phone. In the Chetpet slum, many knew that a communist leader lived nearby and could be approached for emergency help.

Listening to her story of the All India Democratic Women's Association's (AIDWA's) agitation for women's toilets in public places so that working class women might relieve themselves in safety and dignity, the grandmother of my friend (in whose house I was then playing) commented, "I have not thought so far of what women working on the streets do to answer the call of nature. Our *keeraikamma* (vegetable vendor) is always on the move – where does she go?"

The boundaries of my mother's political world were never drawn at the doorstep of our house. I was about two or three years old, when I heard the story of the '*polladha pannaiyaru*' (evil landlord) from my mother, along with the Ramayanam from my grandmother. When I was asked to narrate the Ramayanam by my extended family that regarded me as a story-telling wonder-child, my mother would ask immediately, "Now tell us the story of the *polladha pannaiyaaru*." She made her point well.

After all, many stories of bloodshed, war, martyrdom, and injustice can move us and make up our memories. Why is the story of the prince who was denied his throne more worthy of committing to memory than that of 44 landless poor burnt alive inside a hut in Keezhvenmani?

Even the battle to name me was political! My parents' first choice was Ajitha. K. Ajitha, a young Naxalite, was in the news in the late 1960s when she conducted armed raids on police stations in Kerala. (On my mother's first visit to Keezhvenmani a week after the massacre of December 26, 1968, the local police believed that she was Ajitha and was planning to stir trouble).

Finally, my mother named me in memory of Kalpana Dutt, a freedom fighter and member of the armed independence movement who participated in the Chittagong Armoury Raid of 1930. In 1987, my mother bought me an illustrated book published by the West Bengal government to mark the 40th anniversary of India's independence. Featuring lesser-known heroes of the anti-colonial struggle, the book carries this inscription from her: 'For Kalps – in honour of the other Kalpana after whom she was named!'

Having a young child to look after could not have been easy for my mother in the 1970s and 80s – the intense, packed years of her political activism. While my [maternal] grandmother's constant presence in my life and care-giving allowed my mother to travel frequently, this came at a price for her.

During the Emergency period, when I was two and a half years old, she went underground and spent two months in South Africa in her brother's home. When she called home once and said to me, '*Njan amma pesaren da*' (This is amma speaking), I believe I said, '*Yantha amma?*' (Which amma?), leaving her guilty and more than a little sad.

My grandmother fed me growth vitamins, high-protein biscuits, omelettes and health drinks in the most conspicuous manner possible to counter the maternal 'neglect' that I supposedly suffered. I know that my mother did feel unfairly framed by this narrative about her child languishing without care while she 'blissfully' attended meetings and lived out her political life.

In 1980, she was invited by the All China Women's Federation to visit and spend a month in the country. During this visit, she sent a postcard to my father in which she wrote, "I am trying to not worry about Kalps. PI take her and give her a hair cut – a proper girl's cut."

She told me later, wincing when looking at old photographs, that she felt guilty about how 'badly' my hair was cut during my childhood. "I made them give you the shortest 'boy cut' they could to make it easy for me to manage your hair."

She constantly worried that I might be bad at written Tamil as she had sent me to an English medium school. We had a small blackboard in the bedroom on which I would do Tamil dictation under her supervision. My mother who declared that she did not care about my academic performance would lose her temper if I got any Tamil spelling wrong. She did not seem to care that I wasn't doing well in Maths, later to become my great nightmare!

However, she cared very much that I read and that I had a steady supply of children's books in English and Tamil. I remember well the 25 paise books from the Soviet Press (Raduga Publishers?). She came home one day triumphant and delighted. She had bought 20 books for Rs. 5!

Ours was a communist house – framed pictures of Marx, Lenin and Mao adorned our walls. I grew up knowing them as Marx thatha, Lenin thatha and Mao thatha. I certainly identified with them more than I did with my Sivaraman thatha or Ekambaram thatha who paled in comparison!

My memories of public meetings where my mother spoke are somewhat disjointed. In an air-conditioned hall (perhaps the Russian Cultural Centre), she spoke of the child labourers of the Sivakasi fireworks units who had died when their bus met with an accident. "Was it an accident that they were woken up at 4 a.m. daily and transported to the factories? Was it an accident that they usually returned at 7 p.m., half-dead with fatigue? Was it an accident ....?," she continued. The audience was transfixed.

As I was studying in a women's college in Chennai, I would bring my close friends and interested college-mates to these meetings. As a well-known women's rights activist in the city, my mother had been an invited guest speaker at both the schools I went to and my college as well.

While I was sometimes embarrassed when the 'famous social worker' Mythily Sivaraman visited my turf as a guest of honour, my mother took great pride and pleasure in my efforts to partake of her world. In my high school years, I was a member of a Communist Party of India (Marxist)-organised music choir group that was trained by a student of M.B.Srinivasan. I was first a member of the

Samantha Smith choir for children and later became a part of the Nelson Mandela Kalai Kuzhu that included adults too.

We would sing to enthuse the crowds before election meetings, at May Day events and at public fora organised by the TN Progressive Writers' Association. During the election campaign performances that preceded the state Assembly election of January 1989, I would sometimes be dropped home at 12 a.m. She relished many of the songs we sang and her two favourites that I sang often at home on her demand were '*Vidhuthalai porinil veezndha malare*' (The flower that fell in India's independence struggle) in memory of the martyrs of India's independence struggle and '*Paadhai mudiyum munne, payanam vellum munne*', composed to honour the death of Ho Chi Minh.

She repeatedly let me know through my school and college years that neither she nor my father cared about my marks in school exams and I did not have to get into any prestigious institution. There was no 'doctor, engineer' pressure on me. The marriage rules were equally straightforward. "If you ever decide to marry, you will find your own husband," she would say, adding, "It is not my business to find one for you. I simply refuse to do it." She would add, "But make sure that whoever you choose, the two of you react the same way to the news in the morning papers on a daily basis. That's the most important thing."

And just in case I had not got the point, she followed it up on a few occasions with, "If you marry a Congress chap, we will disown the son-in-law. If you marry an RSS/ VHP/ Hindu Munnani type, we will disown you." Apart from these reasonable restrictions, I could be and do whatever I wanted to in life.

Another source of some anxiety for her was the question of my friendships and interaction with boys during my teen years. Studying at a co-educational school, I had several close friends amongst the boys in my class. They would come home, play shuttle with me and call to chat on the phone as well. I would stand at the gate of our compound chatting with my school friends, making the neighbours unhappy at the 'bad example' I was setting their daughters. That I had the parental permission to do this was rather unusual at that point of time (mid-to-late 1980s).

In 1987, her mentor V. P. Chinthan died, suddenly leaving a void in her life. The Soviet Union started to crack and my mother's moods often darkened at the least provocation. Unhappily enough, I was on the threshold of my teens at the same time. During this period, we would fight suddenly and she would sometimes sit at my bedside in the evenings, and argue with me and weep in a manner that I had no way of responding to. I seemed to sense that this was not really about me, although I did feel aggrieved that I was being targeted.



Looking back on this period, I feel that she was perhaps lonely, grieving for VPC and maybe even seeking my companionship at the same time. But I was too young and too self-absorbed to give it to her.

I have seen her fully relaxed only during our out-station holiday travelling made possible by my father's LTC facility at work. We would laugh a great deal together on these holidays and I have seen her laugh herself silly, especially when she mimicked and made fun of my father's idiosyncrasies and his pathetic efforts to speak Hindi!

But equally and perhaps more, I have witnessed her bouts of violent illnesses that involved retching, stomach pain episodes and severe migraines. I remember a party comrade approaching her at a meeting and asking her to come to speak in his district for a party event. She said she could not and that he must ask someone else. He retorted, "But everyone insists they want Mythily." Her refusal was sharp and took him aback. I sensed her exhaustion and frustration at the demands on her. But I was annoyed with her for saying 'no'. Although still young, I was already invested in the idea of Mythily the leader, the public figure.

By the mid-1990s when I was a Masters student in JNU, my father finally heard of depression (clinical) through a journal article. It seemed to explain why the chronic pain that my mother had often complained of had not been addressed by any doctor. But anti-depressants did help from the mid-1990s. The immediate effect was dramatic and they seemed to have bought her time.

My father was outraged that my mother's physicians had not even suggested that we get a psychological assessment done through the many years of her suffering. When he told me about my mother's depression for the first time, I was shocked to hear that the mind could impact the body. The domain of the mind was not something my communist household ever discussed. Do Marxists acknowledge that the mind may sometimes have suzerainty over the body?

In January 1999, at the AIDWA state conference conducted in Nagercoil that I attended as a representative from the Tamil Nadu Science Forum (TNSF)-associated SAMAM movement, my mother said to me, "This time, I have marginalised myself." She was unable to speak at the public meeting, losing the energy and stamina to do it.

In 2002–04, I began to increasingly perceive my mother's unease with herself and her sense of dislocation in her familiar universe. This period also coincided with my own emergence as a public person, a public speaker and a young activist into a world that overlapped but did not entirely coincide with her world of politics.

At the AIDWA state conference held in Virudunagar in 2002, she stepped down as Working President of the AIDWA. At the time, she wanted to devote herself to researching and writing her book on her grandmother Subbalakshmi (published by Zubaan in 2006). But I resented her move and wished she would not step away from the limelight.

Subsequently, I was surprised to see the enthusiasm with which she threw herself into working on the book. Several days in a row, she would reach the Egmore Archives at 9 a.m. and spend a whole day in reading and research. Although she gave me a draft of the book to read, wondering loudly how she was going to proceed if no one gave her feedback on the book, I was unable to read it.

When Urvashi Butalia (of Zubaan) expressed interest and sent her an email saying, 'Mythily, you write beautiful', my mother kissed me in excitement and joy. While I was surprised and happy for her, I felt unable to respond. By then, the anxiety that clenched my stomach on all matters to do with her had become routine.

.In August 2007, NIMHANS in Bangalore diagnosed her with Alzheimer's Disease. She had crossed the early stage and was found to be in the mild-to-moderate stage. We were warned that the disease would erode not only memory (as is popularly understood), but also the capacities of perception, cognition, judgement, abstraction and reasoning. Familiar tasks and chores would seem like insurmountable challenges.

Subsequent to her diagnosis, I began to notice that my mother did not participate in family conversations. So, we argued over politics and discussed the daily news in her presence, but not with her. She seemed to have become invisible to us in some ways.

When she often expressed her frustration for no more being a part of public life and at having lost that world, I would say to her in some anger, "You have had a full life, amma. Why can't you retire? Just read books, watch movies, listen to music. Haven't you earned the rest?" She would respond, "Who retires amongst us? Did Jyothi Basu retire? Or did Com. Surjeet retire?"

And yet, it was during this difficult period (in March 2010) that my mother spoke at a public meeting held to launch the Tamil translation of her book on Subbalakshmi's life, published by Bharathi Puthagalayam. I remember exiting the hall just before her turn to speak. My stomach was knotted and my palms were sweating. When I heard later that she had done well, despite some struggle and lapses in the narration, I was hugely relieved.

In the last few years, I feel grateful that I have discovered my mother in some new ways, even as I have lost her in other ways. Shortly after my mother was diagnosed in 2007, I began rehearsal for a Tamil play, *Kalakkanavu* staged by the feminist theatre collective Marappachi. The play historically traced the multiple political contexts enabling women's emergence in the public sphere in the early part of the 20th century.

My great-grandmother Subbalakshmi was a character in the play and I played her role. Reading my mother's book on Subbalakshmi for the first time, I was moved by the book and ashamed to be reading it so late. In early 2011, urged by V. Geetha, we started to put together a collection of the essays my mother wrote in the *Radical Review* and other journals from the late 1960s to the early-1980s (This book *Haunted by Fire* was published by LeftWord in 2013).

While I knew of course that she had edited and wrote for the *Radical Review*, I was not prepared for the depth and the erudition of her writings or her painstaking research. I would often stop and start reading particular pieces even before the work of putting them together was done. I was haunted by the visual image of a wispy young woman visiting village after class-struggle wracked village in Thanjavur and Nagapattinam, documenting whether the red flag flew here and if not, asking when it would fly again.

As part of shooting for the documentary film that the historian Uma Chakravarty made on my mother, we took her to Keezhvenmani in September 2011. On the way, I recalled my first visit to Keezhvenmani in the company of my parents and K. Chandru and Bharathi (newly-weds then) in January 1992. It was a road trip and we reached Keezhvenmani on Pongal day.

More recently, Bharathi told me that my mother and Chandru had reminisced incessantly about Nagammal on that journey. A peasant woman from South Arcot district who was confined and brutally tortured by the police during the Emergency period, Nagammal had sought the assistance of the AIDWA and my mother had followed up the case, helping her with legal assistance and writing about it. (Nagammal's quest for justice is now the theme of a play scripted by Geetha and directed by Mangai).

I think I understand now my mother's regret at not having recorded her grandmother Subbalakshmi's memories about her own fascinating life, lived mostly in shadows and silences. She has expressed this regret in the preface to her book on Subbalakshmi's life, *Fragments of a Life: a Family Archive*.

She starts the preface by saying that she had always regretted not having a 'typical' Indian grandmother who would tell her thrilling stories during meal hours, gently rock her to sleep, sing her lullabies, indulge her tantrums or protect her from the bullying of her older siblings.

My mother was not a typical Indian mother by anyone's standard. But there is nothing to regret here and much to celebrate. She has given me a rich legacy of memories that I am still struggling to make sense of. Her life-choices and personal/political journeys constantly force me to ask myself if I am living a life that is worthy of her. Who could ask for more?

## COVID-19 Lays Bare Exploitation and Struggles of Domestic Workers

-Satarupa Chakraborty, activist, AIDWA, Globetrotter/Peoples Dispatch fellow, researcher at Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research

[This is a slightly edited form of an article by her produced by Globetrotter.]



Domestic workers organized with the All India Democratic Women's Association in Lucknow, UP at a protest to demand recognition as workers as well as emergency financial aid.

In India, the labor of millions of women domestic workers is not recognized, depriving them of labor rights, formal terms of employment, and respect.

[Official government records](#) estimate a conservative figure of 3.9 million domestic workers in the country (2.6 million of whom are women). A report in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, however, puts the number of domestic workers much higher, at [more than 50 million](#) domestic workers, with women making up more than 75 per cent of the workforce in this sector.

Bengaluru has an estimated [400,000](#) domestic workers. They constitute a large proportion of the city's workforce, and yet they still [lack](#) fundamental rights, a fact that has become even more apparent since the start of the pandemic.

Kajita (28) and Noor (45) are migrant workers from West Bengal. Living 2,000 kilometers away from home, they dwell in a slum in east Bengaluru's Thubarahalli area—hidden by the rising apartments in an upscale locality that connects the two major IT centres, Marathahalli and Whitefield.

India's migrant workers, who move from rural to urban areas in search of gainful employment, take a big share of the burden of household income onto their shoulders—most of them send a major part of their income to their families in the villages for their sustenance. They live in cramped shanties of tarpaulins and tins in a sprawling city of soaring expenses and expanse.

Before the countrywide [lockdown](#) was announced in March 2020, Kajita would start her day at 4:45 a.m. and return home after 9 p.m. She would work for more than 15 hours a day in 10 households. Noor would go to work at 5:45 a.m. and return around 6:30 p.m. She used to work in four households—eight hours in one household and then dividing the rest of her time working in other houses. Their work includes but is not limited to sweeping, cleaning, cooking, washing dishes and clothes, and child and elderly care.

While they take the heavy burden of physical work, their work is far from being [recognized](#). The household chores have been historically seen as tasks that women are supposed to perform without asking for any remuneration. The United Nations [highlighted](#) the lack of public acceptance to consider a household as a place of work—resulting in non-recognition of women's labour at a household as work. The UN also points out that India lacks comprehensive national legislation that would guarantee formal terms of employment, including minimum wage and decent working conditions, to the domestic workers. They are often left at the mercy of their employers without having access to any social and economic benefits from the state. Speaking up about their day-to-day exploitations often could mean threats, intimidation and violence. Weekly days off, time off for holidays, or annual paid leave is a privilege most domestic workers are deprived of.

Kajita and Noor's income was just about enough to support themselves and their families before the announcement of a lockdown in India. While a younger worker like Kajita might take up work in about a dozen houses to supplement her income, older workers like Noor typically take up an 8-hour or 12-hour job with one household and try to earn a major part of their income from there. The income they earned throughout a decade of work as domestic workers was neither sufficient to uplift their standard of living nor could it ensure them a "healthy and safe stay at home" during the pandemic.

Once the lockdown began in India, Kajita and Noor and the other domestic workers found themselves without work for more than four months. One of Kajita's employers paid her the first two months of the salary during the initial phase of the lockdown, while the others refused to pay her during the lockdown. She lost around 90 per cent of her monthly income for several months. Noor was paid half the amount of her salary for the first two months of the lockdown. Kajita now earns Rs 7,000 (\$96) per month—a sharp decline in her income by more

than 70 per cent from Rs 30,000 (\$413) a month that she earned before the lockdown; and Noor earns Rs 11,500 (\$158)—her salary declined by almost 50 per cent from Rs 20,000 (\$275) a month.

The household expenditure, however, did not fall with the falling income. It, in fact, increased compared to the proportion of income. Kajita and Noor each had to pay Rs 2,500 (\$34) as the rent for their shanties and electricity bills even during the lockdown. They still had to buy a 20-liter can of drinking water for Rs 25 (\$0.34)—in the absence of access to clean drinking water in the slum area where they live—along with other essential items.

Noor told me in October 2020, “What we received [as a food kit from some organizations such as the Centre of Indian Trade Unions and Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti] for one month, we survived on [it] for more than two months. Since the lockdown, our life has changed. We have no income, but we continued to spend.” Kajita said, “We [Kajita’s younger brother and sister] shared one meal three times a day. We have never seen [this kind of misery] earlier.”

S. Selvi, the general secretary of a domestic workers’ union in Bengaluru—affiliated with the [Centre of Indian Trade Unions](#) (CITU)—began her journey of working with domestic workers in 2012. In her experience, the most common threats of violence surface when a domestic worker asks for a hike in wage—or refuses to perform tasks other than the ones agreed in verbal negotiations at the time of joining—or when a worker resists sexual abuse by the male employer.

Intimidated by the threat that an employer could file a theft report with the police against them (even if they are innocent), most domestic workers tend to suppress their voice. They fear job loss; they fear actions on them or their families by employers. Therefore, in most cases, they avoid registering any complaint.

Selvi told me about the case of Meena who was employed by a man in north Bengaluru. She said, “The employer used to torture and sexually assault her. When she opposed, the employer beat her. Her body was marked with burnt wounds of cigarette butt stubbing. He used to torture her so much so that she had to be finally hospitalized.”

“In another case, in north Bengaluru,” she told me, “the employers filed a police complaint against a worker, Nilam, alleging theft. She was innocent. The complaint was an insult for her; she could not take the blame, and attempted suicide”. With the intervention of the union, both Meena and Nilam were rescued. Selvi emphasized, “In [these] situations, organizations [like] [All India Democratic Women’s Association](#) (AIDWA) play an important role in giving confidence to the victim and motivating her to register a complaint.”

The continual battle by unions and organizations to safeguard the rights and lives of domestic workers has pushed the Central Government to at least introduce the Domestic Workers (Regulation of Work and Social Security) Bill, 2017. The formation of a [“national policy”](#) for safeguarding the interest of domestic workers has been pending for several years. However, the challenges in their lives are not pending—they do not vanish, with or without a pandemic.



## *Women's Struggles across the World*

### **Palestine's Freedom and Palestinian Women's Liberation — One Cannot Happen without the Other**

-Surangya, AIDWA, Delhi



Starting from May 10, Israel bombed Gaza for 11 days. At least 256 Palestinians were killed including 66 children and 40 women. Homes, schools, hospitals were destroyed, all amidst a raging pandemic which had already devastated the region. These Israeli hostilities, along with the ones carried out over the past seven decades, backed by the US of course, have done little to hamper the Palestinian dream of freedom from occupation. They have even strengthened the political will of the people of Palestine. There are also women in these struggles who have categorically stated that no freedom is possible without the freedom of women. The everyday violence women face living in a patriarchal society is aggravated by the violence of the colonial occupation. In all their movements for social, political and economic emancipation-- be it against domestic violence and femicides or for political rights-- the common demand for freedom from Israeli occupation is a joint refrain.

Talking about everyday life for Palestinian women as they navigate both Israeli apartheid and gender-based oppression, Abeer Abu Khader from the Union of Palestinian Women's Committees (UPCW) told me in an interview, "Palestinian

women face social burdens imposed by the occupation on their daily life, such as the apartheid wall, military gates, house demolitions, and daily arrests. This along with sexual harassment of women, especially female students who go to universities daily, by Zionist fanatics has increased their social oppression and the monitoring they face by society. In addition, women bear the burdens of natural and social differences in a way that often exceeds what other oppressed and poor sections bear. Women often bear the burdens and consequences of the current situation more than men, especially as women bear the huge responsibility of managing the internal affairs of the family in the current crisis.”

Gender based violence is no less a problem in Palestinian society than in all capitalist and patriarchal societies. However, during military operations such as the recent one, the risks of experiencing gender-based violence increase. For instance, during Operation Protective Edge in 2014, the International Institute for Environment and Development [found](#) that there was a 22% increase in the forms of domestic violence experienced by married women, and 30% for non-married women. After ceasefire was declared in the recent Gaza offensive, the UNOCHA found in their [Situation Report](#), “At the height of the escalation, 113,000 displaced people sought shelter and protection at UNRWA schools and hosting communities.” The displacement and insecurity caused by such offensives also leads to increasing instances of domestic violence.

It is hard to imagine how these violent disruptions impact the lives of children. While on the one hand it results in the idea of a free Palestine being a part of their imagination from early on, it also means there is no possibility of any normalcy in their childhoods. UNOCHA estimated that education of nearly 600,000 children was disrupted as Israel bombed Gaza this time and destroyed their schools and homes. Their mental health is also impacted. Of the 66 children who died, 11 were participating in a program helping them to cope with trauma caused by the constant violence of the occupation they live under.

It needs to be remembered that these hostilities came amid a raging pandemic which had already stretched Gaza’s resources and infrastructure, particularly the health system. Nine hospitals and 19 primary healthcare centres along with water and sanitation facilities were damaged. Doctors and medical staff were among the casualties of Israel’s attacks. “The direct targeting of health facilities, the failure of ambulance teams to reach the wounded to evacuate them to hospitals, the destruction of roads leading to hospitals, has increased the burden on women, as they are responsible for securing the daily life of their families in the

light of the collapse of the economy and the fragmentation of families,” Abeer explained.

The analysis of this situation has led women’s movements and organizations in Palestine to proclaim that women’s struggles and the broader struggle for political liberation are interconnected, one cannot happen without the other.

At the same time, Palestinian women have also expressed anger over their struggles being sidelined by the larger movements against Israeli apartheid and occupation. Tal3at (meaning ‘step out’ in Arabic) is an important women’s collective which was formed in Palestine in 2019 as a wave of anger erupted when 21 year old Palestinian woman Israa Ghrayeb was killed by her family members. Israa was among 34 Palestinian women killed that year according to data collected by Tal3at. The massive demonstrations that were held in response across Palestine and parts of Lebanon [raised the slogan](#), “There is no free homeland, without women’s freedom.”



Thousands of Tal3at activists mobilized across Palestine against violence against women in September 2019. Photo: Sharif Mosa

A day before the mobilizations were held in September 2019, a member of Tal3at [wrote](#) , “We reject postponement of the struggle of Palestinian women for freedom until after national liberation and with this in mind, this movement aims to redefine national liberation as comprehensive, holistic liberation for all. Indeed, national liberation means not only liberation and emancipation from Israeli

domination and oppression and 'bureaucratic statehood'. It also means complete freedom, justice and human dignity for every Palestinian.”

As Abeer explained, the UPCW actively works with women and children, to empower them, for their rights, as well as to propagate the ideas of the Palestine liberation struggle. “The Union aims to improve the status of Palestinian women and empower them to ensure real equality between women and men and social justice for all segments of society. The Union is also an integral part of the Palestinian national movement that struggles to get rid of the Zionist occupation. It struggles along with all progressive, Arab and international movements against the aggressiveness of globalization and against all forms of discrimination and injustice against any social group in the world, especially women.

The Union works annually with approximately 30,000 women in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, through many programs and activities based on the needs of women. The Union gives special priority to working with poor women living in remote and marginalized villages, in addition to providing programs especially for women in refugee camps, such as economic support, legal and psychological advice, as well as a basic program of awareness and empowerment. The Union also works with urban women by encouraging them to engage in social life. Cities in Palestine are better than villages and camps in terms of services but still suffer from traditions and customs that constrain women and limit their access to their rights. ...

The Union also works to target groups of children in order to raise them on the concepts of freedom and democracy, equality and justice through courses and summer camps.”

Even after the ceasefire was announced on May 21, Israeli hostilities have continued. The new government of Naftali Bennet has already violated the ceasefire twice, bombing Gaza again. Attempts to forcibly evict Palestinians, attacks on protestors and other intimidation techniques are still going on. However, with the youth still bravely resisting, and the next generations being raised with the ideas of freedom and liberation, the Palestinian dream is alive and strong.

**Follow us on:**

**Facebook:** <https://www.facebook.com/AIDWA/>

**Website:** <http://www.aidwaonline.org>