



**TORCH  
BEARERS  
OF  
AIDWA**

# **TORCH BEARERS OF THE ALL INDIA DEMOCRATIC WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION**

Edited by :  
**Malini Bhattacharya**  
**Tanvi**

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All India Democratic Women's Association**

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## Introduction

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In this booklet, published on the occasion of the 10<sup>th</sup> Conference of All India Democratic Women's Association, we pay our homage to some of the pioneers of the women's movement in India who also laid the foundations of our Association. The leaders whose lives and activities are commemorated in these few pages are Jyoti Chakraborty from West Bengal, Janaki Ammal from Tamil Nadu, Manikonda Suryavathi from Andhra Pradesh, Devaki Warriar from Kerala, Niruben Patel from Gujarat and Sukhamati Debbarma from Tripura. Apart from the last-mentioned, the rest are no more with us. But at a time when our Association is engaged in grim struggles against the present neo-liberal regime in our country, which also presides over the unleashing anew of forces of social reaction like communalism, casteism and aggravated gender violence, it is necessary for us to recall the fighting tradition represented by these women that is our glorious heritage. As Manikonda Suryavathi said in 1993 in the last public meeting attended by her, "We have no other way but to start another struggle for Independence!"

However, this is not the only reason why we have published this booklet. The women we commemorate were too deeply engaged in their struggles to write the history of these struggles themselves. Some of them like Jyoti Chakraborty did indeed leave some written records, often in their first language, of the experiences that formed them. As for the rest, we learn about them only from secondary sources like the literature of the organization to which they belonged, newspaper articles, oral and written comments on them by their contemporaries and of course anecdotes and hearsay that circulate about them. But as the representatives of crucial moments in the history of the women's movement and the history of our country, they are relevant not merely for those who belong to our Association, but a larger circle of younger readers and scholars to whom this history is of surpassing importance. In view of the conspiracy of negligence of our own past that prevails in today's neo-liberal intellectual atmosphere, it becomes an ideological responsibility for us to collate the scattered information that is still available on these women and to bring them before the public eye.

What struck us when we looked at the collected materials was the variety in the respective trajectories of their development—regional differences, differences in the social milieu in which they developed, differences in the kind of work that they chose for themselves. The extraordinary career of Janaki Ammal started, when she was in her early teens, as an actor in both male and female roles in Palaniyappa Theatre Company. Sukhamati Debbarma was born in a tribal family in remote Tripura. The circumstances in which they developed were very different from the circumstances which formed Devaki Warriar or Niruben Patel. Jyoti Chakraborty's rural Bengal was different in many ways from the rural Andhra in

which Suryavathi grew up. The varied local contexts that shaped their lives remind us that AIDWA as an all-India organization did not spring fully-formed from a pre-ordained centre, but it represents the simultaneous aspirations of many people working since the 1930s and 1940s in different conditions in different parts of the country. It is a culmination of their multifarious struggles.

At the same time the thread of continuity which runs through all the narratives cannot be missed. One overwhelming theme, of course, is the inspiration of the struggle for freedom from British domination. Although some theorists have spoken of the nationalist struggle as having subsumed under its broader political agenda the social struggle for women's rights, our narratives offer many examples of such leaders of women as we present here, perceiving freedom in a much larger sense than what the 'nationalist' agenda offered and seeking to combine their struggles against the British with movements for social and economic justice. It is this search for larger justice which formed the common context of their role in shaping the women's movement in their own states. Again, if this search had not been there, one and all of them would not have graduated to a consciousness of socialism as a long-term goal to which our present struggles are but preliminary steps.

Most of these women were married off at an early age at a time when the question of their consent was irrelevant. The two exceptions are Janaki Ammal and Devaki Warriar, who married of their own choice; but their circumstances differed widely. In the other cases, a supportive family and/or a supportive husband helped their initiation into the life of activism. However, even in these cases, no one can say that they continued to work under the shadow of their original mentors or

because of family affiliations. The path they chose was their own and they trod it knowing full well that the responsibility for all consequences ultimately lay on the one who had made the commitment. We find this courage of conviction in Janaki Ammal as well as in Jyoti Chakraborty who became a communist together with her friend Sushila at a time when her husband was still actively affiliated with Congress.

AIDWA thanks all those, particularly our State Committees, who provided us with the materials we have used here; a special vote of thanks must go to our young friend Tanvi, who helped us in collating and copy-editing the materials. AIDWA hopes that these narratives will inspire activists and social historians in the coming days.

- **Malini Bhattacharya**

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# Jyoti Chakraborty

West Bengal



## An early marriage

Jyoti Chakraborty's daughter, Shephali, remembering her mother after her death wrote about a visit to the school in Majidi, Noakhali, now in Bangladesh, which Jyoti had attended as a child. "I walked along the low earth-wall that separated one plot of farmland from another, crossed a road and arrived at the small adobe building sitting in the shade of large trees that encircled it. This was her school. The teacher said: "your mother, Jyotibala, got a scholarship from this school". Jyoti was born in 1900 to Haranath and Gangasundari Chakraborty.

Actually at that time, there had been no girls' school in the village, but girls were given special permission to attend the one school which was there for boys. Haranath, an educated man himself, did not stint early education to his daughter and so Jyoti was one of the few who did attend school, winning the scholarship in class VI. She would never receive formal education again because in accordance with the custom in those days she was given in marriage to Prasanna Mohan Chakraborty of Takarkhil in Noakhali at the age of 12. Jyoti's memory of the marriage was that her father was crying as the little

daughter sat on his lap. She learned later that he had been weeping because when the bridegroom's party arrived, there had been a sudden demand upon the girl's father that he must give a wristwatch as dowry, otherwise the party would leave without performing the marriage and a girl, once betrothed and rejected, could not be married off again. Jyoti wrote later: "that day my teenager's mind got an indication of women's place in society". In her case, however, the crisis was resolved because the young groom, a graduate studying law and already involved in the freedom movement, resisted his family with rare courage and determination and succeeded in getting the marriage performed. Thus started a relationship in which Jyoti got full support of her husband whether in educating herself at home, or whether in her subsequent social and political activities.

After receiving his law degree, Prasanna Mohan first planned to practice in Comilla where his family had some property but finally opted for the smaller town of Noakhali. A new life started for Jyoti as the young couple set up their household in Noakhali town sometime before 1920. Prasanna Mohan's nephews Birendra Kishore and Manmatha Natha also came from Tatharkhil to study there. They would address the couple as Kakima and Kakababu (aunt and uncle) as is the Bengali custom, and this is how Jyoti and Prasanna Mohan would be affectionately known to most of their acquaintances for the rest of their lives. Any political worker was welcome in the house at any time of the day for a meal. There was a room for students from distant villages to live in and study for their matriculation examination. Later in life, Jyoti would be surprised on several occasions on her visits to even distant places like Varanasi and Hardwar when students who had lived in their Noakhali home ran up to their Kakima to express gratitude.

The move to Noakhali must have opened many doors for Jyoti. One was politics. Fresh in memory was the Jalianwalahbagh massacre of 1919 that left few Indians untouched. Jyoti, too, would say later it was the decisive point for her in joining politics.

The Noakhali house buzzed with political activity of the revolutionary as well as of the Congress kind in which Prasanna Mohan himself was engaged. Among the visitors to their home was Haran Ghosh Choudhary, who was president of the Noakhali District Congress Committee for quite some time and was an MLA in 1946. He was a Gandhian who led a simple life — for which both Jyoti and her husband respected him, though their political views at times might have diverged. Prasanna Mohan in various periods was office-bearer of District Congress Committee and was a member of the All India Congress Committee once. A car belonging to the Congress Committee would be kept in a garage in his house. The space later housed the office of the Saroj Nalini Samiti, the women's welfare organization where Jyoti cut her teeth in the freedom movement as well as the women's movement. It was named after Saroj Nalini Dutt, the social reformer and pioneer in the women's liberation movement in India.

Her introduction to politics thus went apace after moving to Noakhali. Around the time Gandhi launched his non-cooperation struggles and the Khilafat movement was under way, the shift allowed Jyoti access to newspapers such as The Statesman and Ananda Bazar Patrika, which helped her to keep abreast of current affairs, while the monthly Prabasi and books loaned from the Noakhali town hall library enabled her to continue her unfinished education. The other periodical she used to read was Bharatbarsha but preferred Prabasi as Tagore's writing would appear in it with regularity.

Her usual time for reading was after dinner when everyone else had gone to sleep. But it was not until the return of her husband from imprisonment for civil disobedience during Gandhi's salt Satyagraha of 1930 that a serious attempt to learn English was made using books such as the 'Folk Tales of Bengal' by Lal Behari De and those used by her sons. There is at least one report of one of them trespassing into a room and discomfiting their mother who was unobtrusively learning English from Prasanna Mohan. She had

a large notebook in which she would translate Bengali into English to be corrected by Prasanna Mohan. The English lessons were possibly part of her preparations to sit in the matriculation examination, an ambition that was discarded later. Although she would be a hungry reader through her life and wrote Bengali with the utmost clarity in her beautiful hand and recited Sanskrit shlokas with the clearest diction, the lack of grasp of English would remain a sore point with her.

Her husband's political associations made it possible for her to come in touch with women social workers, most of whom were wives of lawyers. But it was her relations with Sushila Mitra that would turn out to be of greater importance and longevity. The group realized that while women must help men in the freedom struggle and carry out Congress programmes, they must also perform a role in educating women. Political freedom would lose all meaning if it did not accompany women's emancipation. Saroj Nalini Samiti was a medium for achieving that by helping women receive vocational training so they could earn for themselves and support their families.

### **A Congress worker**

Jyoti had become a Congress member by paying four annas and worked on expanding party membership and campaigned for boycott of British goods. As the women worked on the charkha in the afternoons, they also read Bengali publications that aroused nationalist feelings. Slowly, the group's area of activity expanded, as first, those who could not read began to be taught to do so. The leaders of the group realized that work would have to be apportioned — for which they needed some sort of an organization, and to buy books and notebooks they had to find the money. A small amount was fixed as donation simultaneously with forming a committee that divided the responsibilities. This was how Jyoti's Samiti work began. The Samiti took the charkha and weaving and other craft into homes in remote villages. Sushila, two of whose brothers were well-known

doctors, brought with her basic skills in midwifery, nursing and child healthcare. Dr Kironmoy Ghosh, a local doctor helped the group by conducting training courses. The result was a remarkable decrease in deaths during childbirths in villages where the Samiti had worked. In 1921, however, tragedy struck the Chakraborty household when Jyoti lost her own first child, a girl who died when she was only 16 months old, possibly because she did not receive proper treatment. She would bear six more children — four boys and two girls, but the shadow of a suspected lapse in medical treatment in the death of her firstborn would haunt her most of her life.

One momentous event after another shook the nation - a fasting Jatin Das died in 1929, the Communists stood accused in the Meerut conspiracy case the same year, the raid on the Chittagong armoury took place in 1930. Following a resolution adopted at the 1929 Congress session, on January 26, 1930, Independence Day was declared after oath-taking across the country. Shortly afterwards, Gandhi started his Dandi March. In those heady days of nationalism, Jyoti and her friend Sushila joined the civil disobedience movement in 1930, setting out for villages to campaign and raise money. The Noakhali District Congress Committee decided that members would take oath wearing home-made khaddar saris and offer themselves up for imprisonment. Jyoti and Sushila were jailed, their babies joining them the following day.

After a month, Jyoti was freed. Sushila was handed a six-month term, which Jyoti found inexplicable as they had committed the same supposed offence. Their organization was in the forefront of the agitation for the release of political prisoners, a demand that brought out the divisions within the Congress. Just as many Congress members were in prison at the time, so were those who believed in armed revolution. But under Gandhi's leadership the Congress sought release only for activists of the non-violent movement. The other part of the Congress, to which Jyoti belonged, pressed for the release

of all prisoners. They demanded that if all prisoners were not freed, Gandhi would not be allowed to go to the Round Table Conference in England. It was a demand that met with rejection.

The Samiti would not, however, give up. Some like Jyoti, despite being members of the district Congress decided — as “mothers” she would later write — to press for the release of numerous young boys. Under Noakhali’s leadership, a conference was held in Comilla of Congress women workers from Noakhali, Dhaka, Chittagong and Comilla. A programme to campaign for the release of political prisoners was adopted there. Meanwhile, a Nari Samiti (women’s association) had been formed in Chittagong, following which the Noakhali outfit also began to call itself by the same name. This was the time when the Samiti developed a mass base, opening chapters from village to village. Jyoti travelled widely in Noakhali from this time under very strenuous circumstances.

### **A new turning**

Rasomoy Majumdar, Birendra (nephew of Prasanna Mohan) and several other Noakhali leaders, who had been inducted into Communism while in jail, were released around this time and frequented Jyoti’s house. Their influence and growing awareness about the socialist experiment in the Soviet Union caused Jyoti and her friend Sushila to turn towards Communism. The second part of her political life took off fired by the realization that women’s liberation could be possible only under socialism. Both became members of the Communist Party in 1941 and Jyoti would recall later a secret conference that was held in Choumuhani, a Noakhali town, as the party was banned at this time, saying how thrilling the initiation was for her and her friend. Prasanna Mohan gradually opted out of active politics, particularly after Independence, perhaps because he was disappointed with the party in power. Although he never became a communist like Jyoti, he continued to give whole-hearted support to her political activities.

With war on one side and threats of Japanese bombardment and a killer famine on the other — Bengal was under siege in the early 1940s. In 1942, several cases of assault on village women by soldiers travelling to the front through Feni in Noakhali were reported, prompting Jyoti and her comrades to take up the cases with the district magistrate and the military authorities. This required some personal courage as one of the activists had been hit by the butt of a rifle causing grievous injury to his brain from which he never fully recovered. The campaign led to the court martial of the offending soldiers.

### **The ‘Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti’**

In this turmoil, women social workers felt the need for a grassroots organization with a profile larger than district-level outfits. The All India Women’s Conference formed in 1927 appeared to be limited to the educated elite and, while it carried out struggles for emancipation of women, it seemed inadequate to meet the immediate needs of security of women during a war period. The consequence was the birth of the Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti (Women’s Self-defence Association).

In 1943, the Samiti was formed and the Noakhali organization became its part. Jyoti and Sushila, both accompanied by newborn children, travelled to Calcutta in May to take part in its first conference in the urban milieu where they felt ill at ease. The declared objective was to achieve full freedom for women in national life and society. The particular demands were: economic liberation, dismantling of social fetters and eradication of illiteracy.

During the manmade Bengal famine of 1943, which killed around 1 million people, the mainly agrarian Noakhali district suffered along with the rest of Bengal. Jyoti and her group started a shelter for destitute women in a part of the house of a friend. Jyoti wrote about those days narrating how women could not emerge from their homes

because they did not have saris to cover themselves. The shelter home bought 10 looms, hired a weaver and started making saris that would not be sold in the market but people, even from remote areas, would visit the Samiti and buy them. It has been recorded that Jyoti and her group's work was being noticed at the national level and P.C. Joshi, the then Communist Party general secretary, met her on a visit to Chittagong.

After the war, as the independence movement escalated into a popular upsurge, the British government started to provoke a communal conflagration. In the infamous riots of 1946, Noakhali district saw some of the worst violence. Prasanna Mohan's ancestral house was attacked and was virtually occupied.

However, when Gandhi came to Noakhali in November, Jyoti, who had gone into hiding, came out in the open to join a team formed by the Samiti to provide relief to victims of riots. The camp for destitute women in Noakhali town now doubled as a shelter for riot victims. About a hundred women had taken refuge there. The young district magistrate, a Muslim, was trying to do his best to protect the women.

Jyoti began to tour the affected villages on foot in November to gauge the extent of the riots, rescuing abducted women and providing relief and rehabilitation. Entering a Muslim house was fraught with danger but what she found most difficult to tackle was when the abducted girl did not dare to meet her and come away with her. She returned to Noakhali town after about two months with a list of affected women. Her ability to help them was restricted not merely by a lack of resources but her movement also had to be curtailed after the police issued a warrant against her. A list which was compiled on one trip had 500 names. Some women were accommodated in the enlarged home and arrangements were made to send most to camps outside the district. By this time, the Communists had been expelled from Congress, and in the changed situation after Partition,

bereft of house and home, Jyoti was eventually forced to move to Calcutta with her ailing husband and young children in December 1949.

### **After Partition**

As hopes of return to Noakhali slowly waned and the inevitable necessity of having to make a living took hold, Prasanna Mohan resumed practicing law in Calcutta. Jyoti went off to meet Muzaffer Ahmed, the veteran Communist leader, to seek his advice on reviving her political work in Calcutta. She had known him from Noakhali which he had visited during the 1942-43 famine and the 1946 riots.

She resumed her work for the party and the Samiti at a time when West Bengal was being rocked by political turbulence. Jyoti and other Samiti members would join a meeting held in memory of peasant women killed at Kakdwip in the course of the Tebhaga movement. The Congress government, walking in the footsteps of the British, declared the Communist Party and the Samiti illegal in 1949. On April 27, 1949, Jyoti heard from her central Calcutta home that police bullets had killed her comrades Latika Sen, Pratibha Ganguly, Gita Sarkar and Amiya Dutta as they marched demanding the release of political prisoners. The Samiti organized protests in the city as an outraged Calcutta shut down spontaneously.

The Samiti saw some success in its campaign against the practice of dowry and for amending the Hindu marriage law, and for free school education for girls. Bidhan Roy, the then Chief Minister, met a Samiti delegation, promising steps to encourage women's education and employment. He kept his word to an extent — education for girls till VIII in government schools was made free and girl students were given work at milk distribution centres. The Samiti collected and dispatched to the central government thousands of signatures in support of its demand to change laws to ban dowry and polygamy. From around 1950, food scarcity had become almost permanent in West Bengal, making the work of collecting food and campaigning

for the right to food a daily duty of the Samiti. Hundreds of activists staged civil disobedience, courting arrest. The Samiti's central Calcutta Branch also held training programmes for women living in the slums, imparting stitching and tailoring lessons to them. Jyoti organized financial assistance for the programme from the Social Welfare Department.

At the 7<sup>th</sup> conference of Calcutta district Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti in 1954, she was made vice-president. In 1958, she became president of the Samiti and a Calcutta district committee member of the Communist Party. Her organizational skill, commitment and campaigning ability drew the leadership's attention as she had arrived already experienced from her work in pre-Independence days at the district level. Manikuntala Sen, Renu Chakraborty, Kamala Mukherjee, Kanak Mukherjee, Pankaj Acharya and Bela Lahiri were her new fellow travelers in Calcutta. At the ninth state conference of the West Bengal Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti on December 31, 1958, and January 1, 1959, it was decided to drop the word 'self-defence' and the Paschimanga Mahila Samiti (West Bengal Women's Association) was born. Jyoti was elected one of the 71 executive committee members. Around this time, some women who supported the Congress quit the association.

### **Working for the Samiti**

An activist of the time wrote later how the Calcutta district Samiti's coffers had run dry. Jyoti and Pankaj Acharya would visit the weekly market (hatt) at Howrah and buy cheap saris and other cloth to sell them from door to door to raise money for the Samiti. They would not accept even reimbursement of transport costs. Nor would Jyoti, who was a whole-time member of the party and was, therefore, eligible for the stipend they were paid, ever take it. Her comrades would say in jest: "Kakababu is funding kakima's work for the party". The fact was that Kakima's needs were meager — and the couple's self-respect a tale in itself.

In 1959, West Bengal was rocked by a teachers' agitation and the food movement, in which on a single day on 31 August, as many as 80 people taking part in a rally in front of Assembly House were killed by the police. Jyoti wrote about the developing food crisis where famine became a seasonal event with people dying of hunger in rural Bengal every August–September or migrating to the city to live on its pavements. The Samiti ran a steady campaign seeking supply of food at low prices in rural areas, relief and rehabilitation. It organized processions in town and villages demanding food, culminating in the hunger rally in Calcutta. In the two years leading up to 1959, some 400-500 women courted arrest.

Jyoti travelled across several districts to organize campaigns. On August 16, when the protests had crested and the police unleashed their fierce attack on the peaceful demonstration, many leaders of the Samiti and its ordinary members were present at the site in front of Assembly House in Calcutta. In 1951, two girls — Kabita and Bandana — were killed in Cooch Behar when the police fired on a food rally. For three days, Samiti members, joined by hundreds of women accompanied by children, sat at Esplanade East to protest against the central government's food policy. Workers, peasants and government employees came in streams to the protest to express support. The Samiti's primary branches and the other mass organizations fed the protesters, and political leaders addressed the gathering everyday till evening. Jyoti saw the protest as bringing together women from all walks of life, leading to a strengthening of the movement.

### **Divisions**

The Samiti could not stay out of the pulls and pressures of the international Communist movement that found expression in domestic positions, too. One section of the leadership, mirroring the views of a group in the party, felt that the democratic women's movement could move forward only through cooperation with the Congress

government. The section Jyoti belonged to did not agree. They felt that the Congress government was the representative of the country's bourgeoisie and landed gentry, against which workers, farmers and the middle class would have to struggle to move forward. Jyoti avoided an invitation which had come to her at this time to visit the Soviet Union as part of a delegation because of this ideological difference. Another political crisis exploded on the party in 1962 during the India-China border dispute. The Indian government declared China as the aggressor and announced a state of emergency, arresting hundreds of Communists from across the country and keeping them imprisoned without trial. Several Samiti leaders like Kanak Mukherjee, Pankaj Acharya and Nirupama Chatterjee were put behind bars. The Samiti's public activities had to be stopped for all practical purposes. Jyoti described those days as a 'trial by fire' for her and for the Samiti. Its craft centre at Scott Lane was attacked by Congress thugs wielding sticks and iron rods and screaming at the members to come out. The landlord stopped them.

On the excuse of national security, democratic rights were taken away and censorship clamped on the media, including the mouthpieces of mass organizations. The underground section of the district party leadership sent word to the mass organizations that a convention should be organized in Calcutta to protest against the snatching of democratic rights. Jyoti was told to preside over the convention. There was no direct contact with the underground leadership. Jyoti had to take decisions on her own. It was a dark rainy evening when Jyoti reached an almost full Muslim Institute hall bursting with enthusiasm. Many who had not expected to see her were glad. The convention went through smoothly without the anticipated police intervention. It was decided that, led by the mass organizations, protests would continue. Later, she presided over a rally demanding protection of democratic rights and freedom for political prisoners at Shahid Minar, from where a delegation carrying a memorandum met the Governor. Writing about that time later,

Kanak Mukherjee said: "During those days, I became aware of Kakima's unflinching revolutionary determination and commitment to work... I remember she would come (to central Calcutta) from distant Tollygunge travelling by a tram with a few annas tied at the end of her sari. At the end of the day she would return alone. If we said anything, she would reply, 'You are younger but I'm far stronger. Don't worry about me'."

### **Pashchimbanga Ganatantrik Mahila Samiti**

A year later, at the 11<sup>th</sup> conference of the Samiti, she was elected one of the vice-presidents. By then the Communist Party had split and the Samiti, which could not be unaffected by this wrenching event, virtually separated into two camps. Jyoti went with CPI (M) after the split in the Party. But it was not until 1970 that the Pashchimbanga Mahila Samiti also split up and the Pashchimbanga Ganatantrik Mahila Samiti was born with Jyoti as President and Madhuri Dasgupta as Secretary. It grew as a result of efforts which had started even earlier at a time when West Bengal was going through a period of unprecedented turmoil. Starting from 1967, one United Front government was toppled after another as the Congress tried by force and by fraud to stem the tide of popular resentment against it and to crush the Left forces fighting against it and mobilizing massive popular support. Jyoti and her comrades kept on travelling to places where people were suffering from police oppression or had been killed in police action. She recalled those days later, saying how thoughts of revenge were in the air that was filled with the cries of mothers who had lost their sons. But the Samiti tried to help turn this popular anger into a mass movement against the ruling powers. After the fall of the first UF government, a thousand members of the Samiti and other sister organizations defied Section 144 in Calcutta and Jyoti was arrested with several hundreds of other women and herded into Presidency Jail. Her comrades kept watch over her all night as she was burning with fever. They were released about 20

days later when elections were declared. However, in 1970, as the Pashchimbanga Ganatantrik Mahila Samiti stood on its feet for the first time, the second United Front government also collapsed and West Bengal was placed under President's rule. In these repressive times, Jyoti, who was 70-years-old by now, did not spare herself in travelling across 15 districts to build and strengthen the newly-found organization. Jyoti held the President's post till 1983, though after the murderous attack on her by Naxalites in 1971, Kanak Mukherjee took charge as the working President from 1973.

### **Semi-Fascist terror**

During the years between 1970 and 1977, the CPI (M), its mass organizations and its other Left allies were the major targets of the atrocities unleashed first under the Ajoy Mukherjee government and then under the regime of Siddhartha Sankar Roy. Criminal gangs were operating together with police and CRP. Criminalized Naxalites joined hands with Congress goons. Nineteen activists of the women's association were killed in their hands and many more were assaulted and humiliated by the police, the CRP and Congress anti-socials. But the Samiti continued its work in slums and in rural areas with distressed people.

Jyoti led a team in 1970 to meet Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in Delhi to inform her of the atrocities committed by the security forces on women. Its immediate context was the attack by the Central Industrial Security Force on workers in Durgapur where she had led a march over six kilometres the previous year to protest against introduction of computers in the Durgapur Steel Plant. The trip to Delhi was preceded by the visit to Durgapur of a Samiti team that noted the role of women in resisting the attack by the authorities on workers and documented incidents of torture. On August 4, some 60,000 workers there struck work. Several other attacks on women, sometimes in the presence of the CRP, as in Dhapa in Calcutta, also took place around that time. The representation to the Prime

Minister, demanding immediate recall of the CRP from West Bengal and announcement of mid-term elections, was made in this context. The Prime Minister said she had not received any reports of violence, promising to enquire. It was followed by a hugely attended meeting at the Boat Club where Jyoti narrated the incidents of attack on women.

Jyoti wrote exhaustively about the atrocities that took place after March 1970 under President's rule and the role played by the Samiti in campaigning against and resisting these. On March 21, a known criminal called Jaihind arrived in a police car at south Belegghata in Calcutta, broke into homes and attacked and abused women. He threatened them: "You want to see what I do to you if you say 'Mahila Samiti Zindabad'?" At night the police raided the area picking up the men and beating up the women. The next day the Mahila Samiti brought out a procession in protest against the police action. On March 24, it marched to the Governor's House to protest and submitted a memorandum seeking redress. Even after that the repression continued. The CRP set up a camp in the house of local criminal Surya Singh and, guided by the thugs, its forces continued indiscriminate attacks. A young woman was raped. When the Governor was told about this, he said such people ought to be shot. But it was a peasant woman that was shot. Fourteen-year-old Chhaya Rani and several others suffered serious injury. None of the offenders was arrested. In north Belegghata's Mianbagan slum, thugs began their attacks from the day of Holi. The Mahila Samiti gathered together the women of the neighbourhood and went around the area, only to be attacked by the hoodlums again. The women sat on the road and sent word to the police station. A police camp was set up but the attacks did not cease.

All these incidents of violence against women in Calcutta and elsewhere reached a peak with the murderous attack on 22 May, 1971 on Jyoti herself, eclipsing everything that had happened before in the scale of its cruelty. Ten-fifteen days before that when the

writing, 'We want Jyoti Chakraborty's head', appeared on the wall of their house, many of their neighbours told Jyoti to go away. But she argued with those who advised her to flee that no one would kill her as she had not done anybody any harm. However, on the morning of that day, a gang of criminals, ostensibly demanding revenge for the murder of a youth in another locality, broke into Jyoti's Tollygunje house armed with pipeguns, bombs and other weapons and with slogans of "Where is CPI (M) pimp Jyoti Chakraborty? We shall kill her!" Several calls made to the local police yielded no result. Jyoti's octogenarian husband, the only other person at home at the time, was thrown on the ground when he tried to prevent them and Jyoti was attacked and left for dead with countless wounds on her frail body and her head. But it was as if to defy the politics of bloodshed that she eventually emerged triumphant from her battle with death at the hospital although the trauma left her incapacitated in body. The family was also unable to return to their house which was first occupied forcibly by a Congress MLA and then sold at a throwaway price to another Congressman. It was for the second time that the family members became refugees.

Jyoti later wrote not in anger but with sadness about that day: "I've been working for my country not since yesterday. In my early days, I took part in the Independence movement against the British. It was only later that I joined the Communist Party. I've been with the CPI (M) from the beginning. For nearly half a century I've seen with my eyes many political movements, participating myself in some of them. I know political activists must suffer. I myself have suffered at the hands of the British and the Congress governments in jail. But today what causes the most grievous sadness and shame is the depth to which boys of a tender age have sunk. I've come back from the doorstep of death, and I bear on my body signs of the most excruciating torment, but I feel even more restless when I see bands of young boys from poor and middle-class families being sucked into the Congress conspiracy of hoodlum politics..."

### **Last days**

Jyoti, who lost her husband in 1980 and gave up in 1983 the post of President of her beloved Samiti to which she had given all her active life, never lost the enthusiasm of her younger days for the politics to which she was committed. Kanak Mukherjee recalled the day, May 31, 1986, when she and her comrades heard in the middle of the 24 Parganas district conference that Kakima was seriously ill. She and some others rushed to see her, many for the last time before her death on July 22.

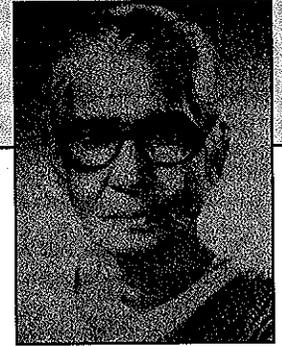
### **Kanak Mukherjee wrote:**

With a great effort she raised her frail arms and held me in her embrace. Tears trickled down her cheeks. I removed the red badge of the conference that I wore and pinned it to her sari near her breast. Kakima burst out in childlike glee: "You're giving it to me? Really?"

Happy laughter lit up the face of the octogenarian standing at the door of death as she fondly touched her red badge.

# K.P. Janaki (Janaki Ammal)

Tamil Nadu



KP Janaki Ammal — affectionately called ‘Amma’ (mother) — was one of the most revered leaders of the people of Tamil Nadu with an unblemished record of 60 years of public life. She was a leader who was a true representative of all the segments of the socially oppressed. Her name became a byword for simplicity. Not only was she one of the pioneers in the women’s movement responsible for laying the corner-stone of the All India Democratic Women’s Association in Tamil Nadu, but her other major contribution in public life was to the movement of peasants and agricultural workers. She continued to be the President of its TN state committee to the last day of her life.

It was a sign of her spirit of discipline and self-abnegating commitment that she would not brook even a few words of praise about herself in a public meeting. She would immediately and openly chide the comrade who spoke such words. Once a big cut-out of her was put up in front of the venue of an AIDWA conference by the local organizers in Madurai, as they thought it would enthuse the delegates. As soon as Amma came to know about it, she exhibited the worst of her anger against it, and

insisted that the cut-out be removed immediately. It was only after persuasion by all her colleagues that she gave up resisting, though with extreme reluctance on her part.

### **Humble origins**

Janaki was born in 1917 to Lakshmi Ammal and Padmanabhan, the latter an employee of a business concern in Madurai. Theirs was a poor family living on limited income. Having lost her mother when she was only eight, she was brought up by her grandmother. Janaki started her early education in the government school in the East Avani Moola Street in Madurai. She continued there up to the eighth standard. As she had a mellifluous voice, her grandmother arranged music tuitions for Janaki.

In the 1920s, the Indian National Congress, under Gandhi's leadership, announced many plans in order to draw people from all the regions of the country into the national movement. People on their own started spinning yarn from cotton and weaving them for their clothing needs. The young Janaki was drawn into the vortex of this movement. She learned to spin cotton yarn for herself and started wearing Khadi linen only.

### **In the theatre**

When she was 12, she encountered a sudden change in the course of her life. She got recruited by the Palaniya Pillai Boys (Drama) company. Those days the drama companies would not recruit girls who had attained puberty. Males used to play female roles. But at this time, the trend had started changing and women came to be inducted into the companies. In fact, Janaki was taken into the company just to be a companion to another woman actor at that point of time. These drama companies reflected the stirring times in propagating patriotism and were so popular that sometimes, as the curtains came down, the audience would raise emotional slogans like 'Bhagat Singh Zindabad' and 'Bande

Mataram'. Naturally, the British government considered them dangerous and banned the performance of many of these plays.

This was the political context in which the 12 year old Janaki entered Palaniya Pillai Boys Company. Those were days when there were no public address systems worth the name. Only people with powerful voices would be selected as actors. Dramas would have fewer dialogues than songs. Even questions and answers would be in the form of songs. Janaki's sonorous voice took her to great heights in the field. Within a year, she started playing lead roles in plays like *Valli Thirumanam*, *Kovalam*, *Manohara*, *Nalla Thangaal*, *Pavalakkodi*, *Harichandra Mayana Kaandam*. Janaki's voice made her the darling of the audience.

Now there came another turning point in Janaki's life. Janaki developed close contact with S Gurusamy, a harmonist in the drama company. Gurusamy was an ardent follower of the Congress movement. It was he who made Janaki take keen interest in the freedom movement. Janaki used to read the literature published by the Congress and discuss it with Gurusamy. Having dedicated her life to the freedom movement, she decided to accept Gurusamy, an activist in the same movement, as her life partner. Though Gurusamy was already married and living with his wife and children, it did not alter her decision. Mythili Sivaraman, in a tribute to Janaki Ammal, surmises that she might have been also wanting to get out of the social stigma that theatre companies carried. The Janaki-Gurusamy marriage took place in 1934. After the marriage, she stepped out of the Boys Company and started acting only in special dramas. She was given Rs. 150 for each performance. It gradually went up to as high as Rs. 300, a considerable sum in those days.

Her independence and unprejudiced outlook is demonstrated in the fact that for all her reputation as an actor, she did not hesitate to perform opposite Viswanatha Das, a talented actor from a so-called 'lower caste', when no other woman would agree to act with him.

Thus she broke a centuries old taboo in a single day. When the same Viswanatha Das wanted to contest in an election for the post of District Board member, Janaki sold off her jewels and gave him the money to enable him to pay his deposit because she was convinced of his dedication to the freedom struggle. To everyone's joy, he won the elections. Das and Janaki were president and vice-president respectively of the Tamil Nadu Drama Actors' Association at that time. The sudden demise of Viswanatha Das while performing on stage caused great shock and grief to both Janaki and Gurusamy.

### **Cultural Activist in the Congress movement**

As she started taking active interest in political activities, Janaki gradually stopped stage-acting and on the advice of Gurusamy, started singing patriotic songs on Congress platforms only. She had lots of invitations from different regions of Tamil Nadu for singing patriotic songs. Once it was advertised that Janaki was going to sing, people would gather in thousands for the meeting. Janaki did not get any money for this singing. She spent her own money which she had saved during her years as an actor. From 1930 to 1936, she sang patriotic songs alone. Janaki became a member of the Congress Party in 1936. In 1938, she sang the national anthem on the platform of the Congress political conference held in Vathalakundu. Since at this time, the Communist Party of India and the Congress Socialist Party were working together within the Congress forum, Vathalakundu gave Janaki an opportunity for the first time to meet leaders like P. Ramamurti, M.R. Venkataraman and the poet and litterateur P. Jeevanandam. They would also frequent her house and enjoy their hospitality like other Congress workers. Even within the Congress forum, a new line of thinking influenced by the Russian Revolution, its achievements and the supremacy of socialism, was being discussed. Gradually, Janaki came under its influence.

Around this time, Janaki experienced the misfortune of giving

birth to a baby boy who was stillborn. This put the couple into deep grief. She did not have any other children, but became 'amma' to those for whom she worked.

P Jeevanandam, however, had a special role in drawing Janaki into politics. He spoke to her, gave her clarity and courage, and ultimately convinced her about it. Let us hear what Janaki says about this meeting: "At the very first meeting, Jeeva spoke to me as if he were a friend who had moved with me for a pretty long time. From that day on, he became my Guru. He spoke to me for an hour or so about the role of women in the freedom struggle, and about the present conditions of women's enslavement. Those spirited and patriotic words are still ringing in my ears... I had not known much about politics those days. All that I knew was Congress party, Mahatma Gandhi and Indian independence. I had just paid four annas and become a member of the Congress party. It was at this stage that Jeeva became my Guru". Janaki would also sing songs written by Jeeva.

After this conference was over, Gurusamy took MRV to their house. MRV said that apart from singing, Janaki should also speak in the meetings. In the process, he explained the policies of the CSP for about an hour. Janaki was simply amazed at the ideological conviction of MRV, and the emotional manner in which he spoke about the need for the Communists to function within the Congress party. MRV took care to explain to Janaki the aims and objectives of the Congress Socialist Party. Whenever he came to Madurai, he used to speak to Janaki and give clarification on many political points. He gave her books to read and emphasised the need for mobilizing women in the fight against the British. He said massive mobilisation of women was necessary for founding a society on the Soviet model in India. MRV put forth another request to her. He requested her to walk through the streets with the party cadres for collecting funds through 'undiyaal' (Collection Box). Initially panicky, she was

ultimately convinced of the need for such work. Starting from her own street, she went around many other streets of Madurai and did undiyal collection. By then, she had shed her inhibitions. She continued to do this work for long. It was leaders like P. Ramamurti, Jeeva and A.K. Gopalan who eventually drew Janaki and Gurusamy into the Congress Socialist Party.

Jeeva also convinced Janaki to speak at public meetings. He took her on a Socialist campaign tour of the South Arcot District which was her first. This campaign lasted 15 days and covered 400 villages. There were more than 300 meetings. Every day there were 10 to 12 meetings in which Jeeva spoke. He also made Janaki speak in all the meetings. He would give her hints for her speech, and encourage her. It gave her confidence in her own powers. "*Kaalukku cheruppumillai; kaal vayitrukku koozhumillai*" (There is no foot-wear for the legs, nor there is porridge to fill even one fourth of the stomach) — it was a song written by Jeeva and was usually sung by Kovai Ramadhas. When Janaki sang these verses, the entire audience would be roused emotionally; some would sob uncontrollably for long.

### **A new turning**

Leftists within the Congress Party — Congress Socialists and Communists — had worked hard for Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose when he contested and won the elections as Congress President. Though the majority of the Congress workers enthused over the victory of Netaji, the staunch followers of Gandhi were unhappy. Because of this, when Subhash Chandra Bose visited various parts of India, Congress leaders who were supporters of Gandhi, boycotted him. When Netaji visited Madurai in the year 1939, the official leadership of the party ignored his visit. However, the Madurai City Congress Party in which Gurusamy was the President and Janaki was the Secretary, arranged a grand reception for him. Pasumpon Muthuramalinga Thevar and Janaki accompanied Netaji and they

visited several areas of Madurai city. People gathered in large numbers throughout Madurai city, and gave Netaji a warm and enthusiastic reception. Netaji hoisted the Congress flag in many areas and also addressed a public meeting that took place at Thamukkam ground in the evening.

In Tamil Nadu, the first Communist Party Committee was formed in Chennai in 1939. Communist leaders like A.K. Gopalan, P. Ramamoorthi, Jeeva, Ramachandra Nedungadi visited several parts of Tamil Nadu and started organizing the students and youth who were involved in freedom struggle and brought them into the fold of the Communist Party. In Madurai, Congress Socialists like Gurusamy, Janaki, M.S.S. Mani, M.R.S. Mani were enrolled into the Communist Party. A.K. Gopalan and Subramaniya Sharma established contacts with the college students in Madurai. Students like N. Shankariah were enrolled by the Communist Party. After such continuous efforts, in the year 1940 the branch unit of Communist Party of India was formed in Madurai. A. Chellaiah, V. Ramanathan, S. Gurusamy, N. Sankaraiyah, K.P. Janaki, I.V. Subbaiah were among the first members of the unit. Many of them were also the committee members of the Congress Party. However, because the Communist Party was at this time campaigning against the Second World War, the party was banned by the British government. Party members went by their nicknames. Janaki was nicknamed as 'Pattu' (song) and Gurusami as 'Tuticorin'.

A few weeks after the commencement of the World War II, the committee meeting of the Congress Socialist Party took place on the terrace of Gurusamy's house. One of the leaders of the banned Communist Party S.V. Ghate participated in it. When the meeting was on, policemen surrounded the house and arrested S.V. Ghate. Janaki herself talks about the incident thus: "I was surprised and frightened by the incident. Knowing my state of mind, Jeeva explained to me the reasons behind the arrest of Ghate. He said, 'Politics

does not mean mere songs and speeches. To be in politics, we have to make sacrifices. Today it is the dais; tomorrow it may be the gallows. Today it is a garland; tomorrow it may be a hangman's noose. People who commit themselves to political life must be equanimous about both the prospects'. On hearing this I replied, 'Come what may, I will stand by my ideology'!"

### **Prison terms**

As a result of her anti-war campaigns, the British government ordered her internment at Golden Rock and she continued her political work organizing the children there into a 'Bala Sangam'. She was teaching them world affairs and the history of the national struggle. Alongside, she was also teaching them the songs of Bharathi and Jeeva.

Soon, as she participated in a massive anti-war campaign meeting in Golden Rock and rendered a song penned by Kovai Ramdas "*Nimirndhu sandai podu thozha*" (Comrade, stand up and fight) and addressed the meeting, she was arrested together with her husband by the police. Both of them were sentenced to a rigorous imprisonment of 6 months. Gurusamy was taken to Kannanur Central Jail, and Janaki to the Vellore Central Jail for women. In the whole of South India, Janaki was the first woman politician who was imprisoned for anti-war campaign.

In the jail, Janaki was a solitary prisoner who could not speak to other inmates. To keep up her spirits, she started getting up by 4.30 in the morning and practicing Bharathiyar's patriotic songs and songs of the movement. The rigours of being a prisoner in the 'C' category and the nearly inedible food affected her health and she contracted asthma from which she would have to suffer for the rest of her life in spite of the fact that she was treated for this in the Jail Hospital. However, once she and Gurusamy were released, they returned to Madurai and continued their political activities as earlier. Since both

were without any income from their profession and they were also providing financial assistance to the Party, they gradually had to sell off the properties Janaki had acquired from her acting career, including her house and jewels. They had to shift to a rented house. But Janaki remained firm in her commitment to her cause.

In 1940, the Communist Party conducted a political camp in a place called Mottaiyarasu which was near Tirupparankuntram near Madurai. As the Communist Party was banned at that time, the camp was left to be organised by the Congress Committee. In this camp, communist leaders like A. K. Gopalan, Subramanya Sharma participated. Congress leaders like Srinivasa Varadhan also participated in this camp. The purpose of this camp was to highlight the policies of the Communist Party and recruit from there cadres who were ready to accept its policies. In this camp, which was held for many days, the participation was more than one hundred. The expenses in connection with the arrangements for the class and food for the participants were met by Janaki who had to sell some of her jewels for this.

The police, who came to know about the participation of known Communist leaders like A. K. Gopalan and Subramanya Sharma, rushed to the spot with the intention of arresting them. However, by the time the police reached, both of them had fled from the place. The participation of Janaki in this camp threw a new light on her thinking. She could get a broader understanding on international and national situations, on Marxist teachings and also about the form of freedom struggles that was to be undertaken.

Continuing with her anti-war campaign, she was arrested again in 1941 under Defence of India Act, and sent to Vellore jail once again by the British government. She was released after 9 months in prison and started participating vigorously in movements on people's issues.

## People's issues

In 1943, the entire nation was gripped by famine, the worst being the Bengal famine. Lakhs of people in Bengal and other eastern parts of India died of starvation. The Communist Party of India pressed its cadres into relief work. It directed the cadres and supporters to collect funds on war footing and send them to the Bengal Committee.

In Tamil Nadu, too, the Communist Party worked in full swing in arranging relief. Though the number of party members was less than in other states, because of its political influence, it could arrange relief in a massive way. The cadres and supporters of the Party in Madurai visited each and every house and shop in the city, explained to them about the Bengal famine and collected funds and other materials. The party office situated in Kaka Thoppu Street in Madurai was filled with heaps of clothes and medicines. All these were sent to Bengal then and there K.P. Janaki and Thiyagi Manavalan conducted a cultural programme titled "*Vangam Paaradi*" (Look at Bengal) in many centres and mobilized the famine relief fund. An exhibition depicting Bengal famine was also organized in Madurai. All these activities enhanced respect for the Communist Party and its leading cadres in the minds of the people of Madurai. Janaki had a major role in it.

In 1944, a struggle broke out in the Harvey Mills of Madurai on Bonus issue. Janaki was arrested and imprisoned for supporting this struggle. She was jailed on January 22 and released on February 25. Madurai Harvey Mills had several thousands of women workers. Janaki and others made all efforts to enroll them as members of Madurai Mill Union. They were also hearing the grievances of the people — about the hardships faced by them in the course of their daily life. A Conference of Weavers with massive participation took place in Madurai city. Leaders like Sarkarai Chettiar, Balachandra Menon and P. Ramamurti participated in this conference. A huge pandhal (shamiana) had been erected on the Vaigai riverbed for this

conference. In the conference that took place for 3 days, 50,000 weavers participated. This conference for the first time put forth important demands for the weavers, viz., co-operative society to be formed for the weavers, thread to be distributed through depots at cheap rates, housing facility to be made available to weavers, etc. The hard work put in by Janaki, along with R.V. Sidha, R.K. Santhulal, K.R. Sundarraman, K.P. Ramudu, K.T. Ramalingam, Rajammal, M. Muniyandi, was behind the successful conduct of this conference.

Around the same time, Janaki started involving herself in the formation of Kisan Sabha in Madurai District. Branches of Kisan Sabha were being formed in Uthamapalayam, Periyakulam and Madurai Taluk. Janaki started visiting the villages one by one for this purpose. She met the farmers and also the women members in their families. Very soon she became famous amongst them. They all affectionately called her 'Janaki Amma'. Branches of the Kisan Sabha started getting formed in the villages. Landlords and the rich people in the rural area were afraid of Janaki and developed animosity towards her.

A few months after the independence of the country in the year 1947, elections for Madurai Corporation were held. Janaki was nominated by the Party as a candidate for ward no. 5 of Poonthottam. There was no universal adult suffrage at that time. Only those who paid tax had voting right. On behalf of Congress, their prominent leader Srinivasa Varadha Iyengar was the candidate. Apart from him, there was one Muneeswara Iyer who was a traditional winner in the ward. However, Janaki won the election by polling 900 votes. The other two candidates could get only 300 votes each.

In 1948, the Communist Party was banned again. The leaders and the cadre of the Communist Party were arrested and imprisoned under the Defence of India Act. The offices of the party

were sealed. Many leaders had to function underground. Janaki was in jail again. This was the time during which both within and outside jail, the party had to face murderous attacks. In Madurai, comrades like Mari, Manavalan, Thillaiivanam were shot dead. In Salem Jail, in the firing on the Communist prisoners, 22 comrades lost their lives. In Cuddalore jail, when the police attempted to shoot comrades A.K. Gopalan and M.R. Venkatraman, both of them had a narrow escape. However, two Andhra comrades lost their lives in that firing. Annai Lakshmi (mother of Pappa Umanath) died on the 29<sup>th</sup> day of her fasting in Chennai Jail. The Communist prisoners in Salem, Vellore, Chennai, Tiruchy, Coimbatore, Madurai, Cuddalore were all attacked several times. Condemning such attacks, the Communist prisoners went on indefinite hunger strike.

When the women Communist prisoners came to know about the attacks on the Communists in Cuddalore and Vellore, they rose in revolt. They also joined the hunger strike. On seeing this, the jail administration started locking Janaki and other Communist women prisoners in separate cells and kept them in solitary confinement for days. They were also attacked. The two children of Anusuya, a prisoner from Andhra Pradesh, were beaten and thrown on the ground. But such attacks could not weaken the Communist women prisoners and the hunger strike continued for 15 days. Janaki, together with other prisoners, was released in 1951. On two other subsequent occasions in 1964, Janaki would go to jail again for her political convictions. These had deleterious effects on her health, but her spirit was unbroken. On one occasion, she fought a battle for a woman prisoner arrested for attempting suicide. A woman warden had beaten up and badly injured the latter for refusing to meet her abusive husband. Janaki became her champion. On another occasion, a warden known as the 'female Hitler' called Janaki a 'jail dog' and threatened to beat her up with chappals. Next day while roll call was on, Janaki, frail as she was, walked up to the warden and hit her with her chappal, unmindful of the consequences.

In 1964, when the Communist Party of India split up, Janaki joined the CPI (M).

### **Kisan Sabha leader and legislator**

From the 1940s, Janaki started functioning in the Kisan Sabha and went around the villages in Madurai Taluk campaigning for the rights of tenants and counteracting threats made by landlords, village headmen and Congressmen by her visits from village to village. Attempts were made to divert the struggle through caste politics and she campaigned to remove such vacillations in the minds of the farmers. In 1954, election for the District Board was held and the Communist Party fielded Janaki as a candidate from Samayanallur constituency. She came out victorious with a big margin because of her popularity. The 1950s witnessed significant growth of the Party as well as the Kisan Sabha units. Many struggles were launched in its wake. On 13 September, 1957, the 9th State Conference of Tamil Nadu Kisan Sabha was held in Pappankulam village under the Ambasamudram Taluk of Tirunelveli district. In this conference, Janaki Amma was elected Executive Committee member of the TN Kisan Sabha and she held this post for long.

In October 1957, in Thuvariman village under Madurai Taluk, the landlords drove out the tenants from the fields where they had been tilling. Opposing this, the farmers along with their family members went to those fields and started ploughing the land. The women under the leadership of Janaki Amma also joined the struggle. Immediately the police arrested Janaki Amma and the farmers. All of them, including women and children, were sent to jail. When Janaki Amma organised the farmers, launched struggles and involved them in picketing, they were often arrested and sent to jail. Seeing this, initially the women of these farmers' families were angry with Janaki Amma. But day by day, there was a change in their attitude. They started realising that Janaki Amma was doing all this only for

their benefit. Then they started respecting her and approaching her for solutions to their own family problems and other disputes.

In the 1960s, the Party as well as the Kisan Sabha registered a number of victories in Madurai Taluk. The struggle launched by the Avaniapuram Sewage Farm farmers under the leadership of the Kisan Sabha against contractors who were trying to evict them met with a degree of success as a result of which more than 500 farmer families benefited. These struggles were launched under the leadership of Janaki Amma and with the participation of farmers like Avaniapuram Subbiah. Because of this struggle Janaki Amma became a popular leader in the Avaniapuram and Valayankulam areas. The Communist Party was known as "*Amma katchi*" (Amma's party) for quite a long time in these areas. Agricultural workers' union was also formed around the same period. Struggles were launched in Aanaiyur, Alankulam, Narasingam, Mayandipatti and Avaniapuram areas demanding increase in the wages paid to the women agricultural workers engaged in the planting of seedlings, weeding, harvesting, etc. Their demands were accepted and wages increased. In a village by name Mangalakudi near Narasingam, the Dalits were denied access to the burning ghat. Tamil Nadu Kisan Sabha immediately swung into action and the path was cleared. Returning to her early role of the cultural activist, Janaki also organized a play on the sad plight of Dalit agricultural labourers.

Janaki won the 1967 general elections for Tamil Nadu Assembly from Madurai East constituency with a wide margin. She functioned very efficiently as legislator — in having live contact with the people in the constituency and in taking up their issues in the Assembly for solution. She worked with the people and for the people for four years till 1971 when the TN Assembly was dissolved. There was an incident in Chennai when she was MLA. There was a clash between the government transport workers and students of the Law college hostel. Driver Syed was brutally attacked and killed in the process.

This aroused the ire of the transport workers. They assembled in their thousands in front of the secretariat and raised angry slogans. It was through the intervention of Janaki Ammal that the workers could be calmed and a settlement was reached with the government. This was an indication of the kind of confidence workers placed on her. As an MLA, her ascetic simplicity and affability attracted people to her.

### **In the women's movement**

In whatever sector Janaki had worked throughout her life, the issue of mobilizing women to fight for their rights had been uppermost in her mind. In 1940, when there had been scarcity of fuel in Madurai as a result of the ongoing War, she mobilised the women into serious struggles that ensured proper distribution of kerosene, food grains, etc. She, along with women volunteers, regulated the queues in the ration shops. She also fought together with the women workers of the Madura Mills and campaigned for the rights of women agricultural labourers. This way, she developed contact even with the families of the workers. Her efforts resulted in the increasing participation of women in political, trade union and Kisan Sabha movements. She also took active interest in forming and strengthening the handloom workers' union. With this, she could draw women from the handloom workers' families into the political movement. Rajammal, Meena Krishnasamy and others were helping her in this work.

From the 1970s, Janaki involved herself fully in forming the units of a new mass-organization of women, the Janayaka Madhar Sangham which would subsequently be merged into AIDWA when its first Conference was held in Chennai in 1981. It had already grown strong in many districts in Tamil Nadu by that time. In its first conference held in 1974, Janaki Ammal was elected president and Pappa Umanath, general secretary. They continued to be elected in all the conferences that followed.

## Last days

Rigorous conditions of her life, strenuous work without let-up, cruel asthma gifted by long periods of incarceration, problems of ageing — all had sapped Janaki's vitals. She had to stop going to the villages. Her memory was failing. Gurusamy had passed away much earlier in 1963 and for a long time the party office had been Janaki's house and home. Pappa Umanath speaks about her last meeting with Janaki Ammal thus: "It was on 8 February, 1992 that I saw Amma last. I had taken lemon rice and fried potatoes for her, as they were her favourites. That day, too, she ate it with relish. Kasthuri and Nagamma were with her. As I was talking to her, she called me aside and said, 'I cannot participate in the state conference. All the parts of my body are dying one by one. I want to die as early as possible. You will at least have an opportunity to name the venue after me.' I was in tears. 'Why do you become sad when I tell the truth?' she shot back."

Towards the end of February the same year, Janaki's health condition became worse. Gurusamy's sister and the AIDWA comrades were beside her day and night, and looked after her. She lost consciousness on 28 February and remained in the same condition till 8 pm on 1 March when she peacefully breathed her last.

Within hours as the news about the demise of the leader spread around Madurai and nearby districts, people with garlands and wreaths started flooding the Madurai urban district committee office of the CPI (M) where her body was lying in state. The DC office area was crowded throughout the night. From next morning, people from villages — men and women in their thousands — came and paid tearful last salutes to their beloved leader. Many wept aloud uncontrollably. Leaders cutting across political lines, the city's elite — all paid homage to Amma.

As the cortege wended through the streets of Madurai, apart from the thousands who joined it, many more standing on the flanks of the streets paid their last homage to her. All shops on the way downed their shutters. Every one mourned their beloved leader.

# Manikonda Suryavathi

Andhra Pradesh



“Wherever women gathered they were discussing about Com. Suryavathi, a young 20-year-old lady, slim and active, working day and night without caring for food or rest.” These were the recollections of the young Suryavathi by Comrade P. C. Joshi in an article written in 1944 as Communist Party General Secretary at the All India Kisan Sabha conference.

## Childhood

Suryavathi, one of the founders of the women’s movement in Andhra Pradesh and in India, was born in Indupalli Village of Krishna District in Andhra in 1921. She came from a rich landlord family and was born to Bhramaramba and Koganti Punnaiah. She spent her childhood in Katuru village with her uncle Kadiyala Gopala Rao, a freedom fighter and a Congress socialist leader. That was the time of freedom struggle. Kadiyala Gopala Rao’s house was a centre of political education for the youth. As per the custom in vogue at that time, her marriage with Manikonda Subba Rao was arranged, at the age of sixteen, by her parents. Subba Rao was attracted towards progressive and socialist ideas and he encouraged Suryavathi also to learn and understand these ideas. Soon after the marriage, he

inducted her into politics and enthused her to serve the people. Those were the days when women dared not step outside their homes, especially from the homes of rich landlords. Yet Suryavathi started working for the cause of women.

### **Entry into women's movement**

At the behest of Gopala Rao, a women's convention was organized in Katuru. Women in large numbers responded to Gandhiji's call for the participation in the freedom struggle. Many women's organizations were formed, but they were restricted to towns and to the higher echelons of society. Vallabhaneni Seethamahalakshamma, a Congress activist, started a women's organization to encourage women to take part in freedom struggle and for social equality. Great leaders like Puchalapalli Sundaraiah, and Chandra Rajeswara Rao also felt that India lives in its villages and any movement to be successful should have its roots in villages. They visualized that unless women have economic equality, social equality cannot be sustained. They not only thought of women as taking part in social and political life, but also encouraged their own family members to take active part in all their movements. Hence on their initiative, Kadiyala Gopala Rao encouraged Suryavathi and Nagalla Rajeswaramma to take active part in the women's movement irrespective of any political associations. As a result in 1936, East Krishna District Womens' Association with 56 members was started. V. Sitalakshmi and Chandra Savitri Devi (wife of Chandra Rajeswara Rao) were elected as its President and Secretary in the general body meeting that followed. The organization aimed at not only understanding rural women but also educating them. This women's association soon started spreading to other districts. In 1942, a general body meeting of the women's association was held in Garikapadu village of Krishna District. V. Sitalakshmi and M. Suryavathi were elected as President and Secretary. In this general body meeting, several resolutions were passed for the uplift of women such as creating educational opportunities for women,

equal wages for women workers with their male colleagues, property rights, toilet facilities, and hospitals for deliveries in all districts. These resolutions were sent to the British government. Several agitations were undertaken in support of these demands. It was a Herculean task to organize a women's meeting in those days, as there were no transport facilities and women had to walk from village to village with their bags in their hands. This in itself was a revolution.

Suryavathi did not confine her activities to Krishna District alone. Through efforts made by her and her comrades, the women's movement spread to 9 districts. She toured faraway districts also like Srikakulam in the North coastal area and Karnool in Rayalaseema region. The first state conference of the Women's Association (Mahila Sangham) was held in 1947 in Chilivuru village of Guntur district. She was elected as state Secretary of this Andhra Mahila Sangham. Dr. Achamamba was its President and Moturu Udayam was the Joint Secretary.

### **Social conditions of the day**

The social conditions prevailing at that time were cruel. Women were not allowed to come out of their houses. Education was forbidden. Middle class and upper class women had to wear veils. The bullockcarts carrying women were covered by curtains. Girls were not allowed to go to schools. Child marriage was most common. Even girls in their mother's lap were married. There was a custom called *kanya sulkam* which meant that the bride's father had to give money to the bridegroom at the time of marriage. This encouraged parents to marry off girls at an early age, so that they would have to pay less money for the bride. Even old men used to marry young girls. The life of a widow was wretched. She could not remarry. She could not go out. She had no property rights. She could not even eat or dress according to her wish. Her natural looks were destroyed by shaving her head and rubbing off the vermilion mark that she wore as a married woman from her forehead. Apart from this she was regarded as a bad omen and had to remain confined

indoors. These customs were fought by Suryavathi with support from some of her colleagues. Women's organizations at that time were fighting for women's property rights to allow her to lead a dignified life. This issue was raised by Renuka Roy in parliament in 1942. As a result the British government appointed a committee under the leadership of B. N. Roy to probe into the matter. When this committee visited Andhra the Mahila Sangham collected 50,000 signatures from nine districts and presented a memorandum for equal rights of women. On the basis of the committee's recommendations the British government made some changes in the law in favour of property rights of wives. This was the first success of the Sangham.

As women were not allowed to come out of their houses, the Women's Association encouraged middle class women to take part in farm activities. The organizers themselves took part in such activities to encourage them. Women were discriminated against in education and employment. Both were considered as the birthright of men alone. Even in marriages, girls' consent was not taken. Only elders of the family used to choose bridegrooms. Daughters-in-law are not allowed to stand in front of anybody, including the husband in daytime. Women could not question any illegal liaisons made by their husbands. Women had to bear all sorts of oppression under the guise of tradition. These traditions hindered women's advancement in any field. Under the influence of feudal society, women themselves thought that these traditions were to be guarded by them. Hence they followed them with utmost devotion.

The Women's Association not only fought for social issues of women but gradually they came to take part in class struggles. In 1942, women took an active part in the struggle against the zamindar of Challapalli in more than 100 villages. One woman, the valiant Viyyamma, died in the struggle. Some women like Guttikonda Seethamma, Annapurnamma were put behind the bars and many women were beaten up by the police.

### **A fight on social status of women**

Suryavathi, in organizing the Women's Association, traveled from village to village on foot. There were no transport facilities at that period as of now. Organizers of women's associations were looked down upon by society during the early days of their struggle. Emancipating women from social oppression was not an easy task. Organizers were abused for taking part in the women's movement without taking care of the family, which was considered to be their prime responsibility. Women were supposed to remain confined to homes and work under the orders of husbands and in-laws. Many were the questions that activists in the women's movement had to face, such as why should not a woman confine herself to cooking for her husband, why should a woman remarry, etc. To take the first step ahead of prevailing social conditions is always a strenuous task but many women like Nagalla Rajeswaramma, Chandra Savitri Devi, Dr Achamamba, Katragadda Hanumayamma, and Vellanki Annapurnamma, along with Suryavathi, took up this uphill task of changing the fate of oppressed women in villages of the Krishna district giving a new perspective to the struggle for political freedom. Eventually, many women from the families of martyrs of freedom struggle and the Telangana struggle took a decisive role in the women's movement.

### **Social reform movement**

Those were the days of the freedom struggle. Movement against social oppression was carried out along with that struggle. Raja Rammohan Roy, Veeresalingam, Iswarachandra Vidyasagar, Jyotiba and Savitri ba Phule fought against the *sati* system, child marriages and encouraged widow remarriage. Strong social movements were built for the education of girls and stopping of child marriages. The Communist Party visualized the importance of a dynamic women's movement. Hence the party appealed to the women of all progressive movements to form an association which could fight against old feudal

values. They also practiced what they preached. On one occasion a widow remarriage was being performed in Penamaluru village of Krishna district of Andhra. The old guards of the village came out to question the sanctity of the marriage. This marriage had been arranged by Suryavathi, Nagella Rajeswaramma, Kadiyala Bullemma, and others. After a long debate and discussion the village elders were convinced and the marriage was solemnized. Youth associations were very active and many youngsters used to come forward to take part in progressive movements such as widow remarriage. In Katuru village the daughter of the temple priest was a widow. Suryavathi convinced the girl about remarriage and led her from her house at midnight. She got her married to a boy of progressive ideas that night itself with the help of Rajeswaramma and returned home calmly. In the morning the family of the girl found that the girl was missing and came to Suryavathi's house and started accusing her. Suryavathi could, however, convince them. After many years, Suryavathi on one occasion came to know that the couple was living happily; her decision had proved to be correct. There were many more occasions where Suryavathi intervened and saved girls from social oppression.

For the first time in 1948, a women's magazine called "Andhra Vanita" was started by the Association. This magazine was banned to stop spreading of progressive ideas and the women's movement. At this time, Suryavathi started an agitation against this attack on freedom of opinion perpetrated by official forces which did not want women to be liberated. As a result, she was arrested with 70 other women for breaking the law and sent to prison in Nandigama. This was her trial by fire and she continued on her path of struggle undeterred. Along with social evils, women's associations fought for the inheritance rights of women. Today, women have equal rights in the property of father; women have equal rights in education and wages. There is a law against child marriage. All these rights were achieved only through women's movements.

Suryavathi took part in a Paramedical training programme conducted by Dr. Achamamba in prenatal and post-natal care for women to enable her to work among village women and see to their needs. She also undertook self-defence training given at that time to protect women from attacks of hoodlums.

### **A people's representative**

Suryavathi got elected for three consecutive terms unanimously as panchayat president of Nandamuru village during 1950s. It was under her initiative that a 5-km road was laid in the locality. She could save six thousand rupees from that fund and got the sides of the village tank repaired. Mango and coconut trees were planted in the village to fetch revenue to the panchayat. She pressurized the government to allot 4 acres of land for dalits. All the required facilities for the land were also provided. She herself donated 25 per cent of her personal property in land for building toilets for women. With her initiative and hard efforts, the village got electricity much before other villages in the district. She also started a public library in the village. She was elected as MLC in 1958 and raised many people's issues on the floor of the house. She was elected as Mandal president of Unguturu in 1987. As in many Indian villages, the villages in this mandal also had no individual toilets for the houses. She made every effort, ignoring her health, and got sanctioned 1810 toilets. She never used her position for her benefit. Like common person she used to travel on foot from village to village. She used to take only Rs 200 as honorarium, and gave the rest to the Communist Party.

### **No fear of confinement**

"She had all the qualities of a good Communist as described by Comrade Dimitrov — utmost dedication towards working class and faith in party, close ties with masses and ability to understand their feelings, gain their respect, ability to take decisions, and 'bolshevik' spirit to fight class enemy."

— Lavu Bala Gangadhara Rao

Between 1948 and 1950, during the period of the Telangana peasants armed struggle, the Communist Party as well as its mass organizations were under constant attack. The tremors of this struggle were felt in adjacent districts of Krishna, Guntur and Godavari. Especially the Gannavaram area of Krishna District was surrounded by government forces whose atrocities are unimaginable. The women's organization also had to pursue its activities in a situation of grave danger. Suryavathi stood firm like a rock during that difficult period. She was arrested and sent to jail. During the same period Janaki Ammal of Tamil Nadu women's movement and Anne Anasuya were also arrested. Suryavathi, along with other women prisoners, fought against the tyranny of the jailor. From their earnings as prisoners they used to send funds outside to support the struggle that was going on. Later, during 1964 war with China, when a section of the Communists stood firm against the jingoist position of the government branding China as the aggressor, hundreds of Communists all over the country were arrested and put in jail. Suryavathi, too, was arrested along with her husband Subbarao during this time. It was a hard time for her since she was the mother of two little kids. But nothing could hamper the spirit with which she served the cause to which she had committed herself.

### **An active associate of the women's movement till death**

From 1942 to 1988 she worked as Krishna district secretary of Andhra Mahila Sangham. From 1989 to 1993 she was its President. She observed increase of occurrences of violence and crime against women and hence started in 1990 a legal aid cell for women. There was a big struggle against liquor in Nellore district. This movement soon spread to other districts of the state. Suryavathi took an active part in the movement. She also started anti-liquor movement in Krishna district with the cooperation of other women's organizations and voluntary organizations. As a result of these struggles, liquor shops were banned by the then chief minister N. T. Rama Rao.

During her tenure, women's movement spread to many districts. In 1974, ten years after the split in the Communist Party, the women's organization also split up. She became the President of the new women's organization which was the mass-organization associated with CPI (M). An organization that had started with 56 members in Krishna district in 1936 has a membership today over six lakhs spread over 23 districts. In 1981, when this organization merged into the newly-founded All India Democratic Women's Association, she was elected as Vice President at the Suryapet conference. She was its Vice President till her death in 1993.

As a founder-member of AIDWA, she was also elected as a central executive member in AIDWA's first conference held in Chennai in 1981.

“Though she used to talk less in general she put her arguments firmly when it was a question of taking the class angle in any discussion. She always encouraged youngsters. At the time of the Suryapet conference she proposed me as President though she was senior to me. She proposed Com. Punyavathi and Rama as CEC members of AIDWA in spite of the fact that they belonged to a different generation. She did this without any trace of egotism.”

—Mallu Swarajyam

### **Her achievements**

“Suryavathi used to meet the requirements of her party cadre first from the donations collected from sympathizers before taking care of any of her own needs.” — Sundarayya, a veteran of the Communist movement.

Her early life was spent in fighting against feudal oppression. She fought against social oppression of women. Starting a women's movement was not an easy task in those days, yet she did it. Sometimes she had to face physical violence also for encouraging women to fight for their rights such as education, property inheritance

and choosing life partner. Today, women can come out of their houses and take up any activities of their choice because of the struggles led by fighters like Suryavathi. Inspired by Puchalapalli Sundarayya she sold all her property and donated the proceeds to the Communist Party. In addition, she urged in her will her children Vani and Rama to contribute Rs. 50,000 to Sundarayya Vignana Kendram and Rs 10,000 to M.B. Bhavan.

### **Her last inspiring message**

On 4 July 1993, a convention of 41 mass organizations was held. This convention was organized to fight against the neo-liberal policies introduced by the Central government under the leadership of P. V. Narasimha Rao. This was the last convention attended by Suryavathi.

In her address, she gave a message to women to fight against the “discrimination in political, economic and social spheres. The new dispensation which blatantly favours the rich against the poor is making a mockery of the achievements of the women’s movement. Liberal economic policies have made women a commodity. Her true self is everywhere put in chains. Crimes against women are on the rise. Dowry deaths, trafficking of women, acid attacks, rapes, and harassing women in the name of love are increasing every day. There is no safety for women in society as we see it today. Even her birth has become a question mark. The policies adopted by the government are increasing the gap between the rich and the poor. The government is pawning our nation to foreigners. They are increasingly interfering and the fruits of our hard-earned independence are on the verge of disappearance. Hence, we have no other way but to start another struggle for independence.”

Sundarayya once complimented Suryavathi as a woman who stood with the party in all its ups and downs. “When the Andhra Party faced electoral setbacks in 1955 general elections many comrades chose to have other occupations for their livelihood, but

Comrade Suryavathi and Comrade Subbarao chose to work for party building.” Her mother-in-law, Manikonda Bullemma, was also inspired to donate her property, which was again used for the party.

From the age of 13 till her last breath she stood for the people, fought for the downtrodden, lived for the oppressed and breathed for the uplift of women. Following in her footsteps is the only way of repaying the debts that the women’s movement owes her.

# Devaki Warriier

Kerala



## A child of many struggles

The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed important social reform movements, struggles by various sections of society for their rights, and also the national movement for the country's independence — all of which left deep marks on Kerala society. The life of Devaki Warriier, who was an offspring of the wave of struggles which changed Kerala and was shaped by the revolutionary movement, cannot be seen in isolation from the history of the struggles for women's advancement in the state.

The social status of women in Kerala was one of the main obstacles in the progress and modernisation of society. The women who were locked behind the four walls of the family were destined to live under male-dominated order. Women in upper caste Hindu households had to suffer even more from the horrors of outdated rituals. The women in the Namboothiri (Brahmin) community — in which remarriage of widows was not permitted — had to put up with untold miseries till the end of their lives. Child

marriage and polygamy prevalent in the community turned the women's lives into hell.

The Namboothiri women had to bear the brunt of the oppression which was caused by orthodox customs and the tragic consequences of the loose sexual life of the males in those feudal days. They had to suffer many repressive customs and rituals like *ghosha* (veil), child marriage, dowry, polygamy, etc, and could never break free from the clutches of illiteracy. The campaigns against these practices, which started to form in the community, led to free thinking among women and men in the community. Inspired by leaders such as EMS Namboothiripad, V.T. Bhattathiripad and others, many Namboothiri women came out of their homes and participated in the struggles for social reform and also the national freedom movement.

### **Childhood and Wardha ashram**

Devaki was born in 1923 to Arya Pallam, foremost among women leaders in the national movement, and Krishnan Namboothiri, a progressive activist. She inherited the idealism of her parents from her childhood. She was nourished on human values and was committed to issues of human rights from a very young age. Holding the fingers of her mother, she participated in committee meetings and social gatherings even during her childhood. Arya Pallam, who was inspired by the ideals of the national movement, sent her daughter — who was just 12 years old at that time — to get education at the Wardha ashram set up by Mahatma Gandhi in Maharashtra.

Life at Wardha played a significant role in moulding Devaki's personality and she gained tremendous insight into Indian society. She learned the art of simple living during this period. The love for nation and need for self-reliance shaped her attitude towards life. The lessons of martial arts and physical training at the Ashram taught

her the preliminaries of empowerment. Very soon she succeeded in conquering the hearts of Gandhiji, Vinoba Bhave, and Kaka Kalethkar. Wardha being a centre for people of refined thoughts, skills and knowledge, Devaki had the privilege of learning many languages too. She learned Hindi, English, Gujarati, and Marathi during her ashram days. In 1938, though Gandhiji was against British education, Devaki procured special permission with a few in the Ashram to enrol for matriculation, i.e. 10<sup>th</sup> class, and passed the examination.

### **Political journey**

In 1939, Devaki came back to Kerala. The situation in her state had also begun changing. Influence of Communist thought and the stirrings of discontent inside the Congress Party triggered the axle of society to shift towards the left. At a time when there existed a ban on the Communist movement, Pallam Illam — Devaki's home — was the lair of the Communist leaders. Influenced by leftist thought, she joined the party in 1943. She also joined the Government College of Integrated Medicine in Madras and took a degree in Ayurveda. During her student days, Devaki was the only woman member of the Madras Students Organisation.

Around the same time as she got membership of the Communist Party, Devaki met fellow activist P. K. R. Warriar — a medical student in Madras — whom she got married to in 1946. It was a magical conjugation of two individuals who were made for each other. She had to travel with her husband, who was a practising doctor, to various places, including London. Later in the 1960s, their family settled in Thiruvananthapuram. Thereupon, Devaki became active in the social and political movements.

## **Joining the women's struggle**

She was active in the Kerala Women's Federation, along with stalwarts like K.R. Gouriamma and Susheela Gopalan. In 1970, she was elected as a councillor in the Trivandrum Municipal Corporation. Elder residents of the Medical College ward, which she represented, still remember with deep respect her dedication and simple lifestyle. She initiated a nutritious food distribution programme for children in her ward under the aegis of the Corporation. The social conscience of Devaki led her to frame many community development programmes implemented by the Corporation during that period. The tireless efforts she made to understand the issues and problems of the downtrodden sections of society are still recalled gratefully by the people and her co-workers. Her enthusiasm and determination inspired her comrades to become a part of the campaigns organised by the party and the Women's Federation.

After the split in the Communist Party, Devaki Warriar was active in the CPI (M) and became a member of the Thiruvananthapuram District Committee. She played an active role in the historic struggle for occupying surplus land in Kerala which was led by Comrade A. K. Gopalan in 1970. She was leader of the volunteer group which occupied the surplus land in the Pattom palace of the former Kings of Travancore.

## **Active on many fronts**

During this period, Devaki rose to the state leadership of the women's movement. She was the first Thiruvananthapuram district president of Kerala Mahila Federation formed in 1968 and was later elected as its state President. At that time not many women participated in politics and in other social activities. The active

leadership of Devaki, who organized various programmes and campaigns, brought in its fold many more women and in turn increased their participation in the committees. She was of strong opinion that without the active role of women, socialism will remain a distant goal. Later, she also played an active role in the formation of the All India Democratic Women's Association. Devaki Warriar, P. Devootty, T. Devi, Sarojini Balanandan, J. Saradamma, V.K. Anandam and Kalyani Teacher were then elected to the Central Committee.

Devaki contested the Kerala Assembly elections from Pattambi constituency in 1977, but could not win. Later, when she was living in Manipal, Karnataka, along with her husband who was a doctor in the Manipal Medical College, she became active in the Women's Federation work in the state. She was proficient in Kannada as well. In 1979, she was elected the state President of the organisation. She got actively involved in the activities of the Left Front in the state. Her unique ability to interact with the people of all sections of the society irrespective of their class and creed made her role special in the social scenario.

The warmth of her character and her commitment to the illiterate and the downtrodden of society enhanced the esteem of women activists as also the activities of the Left Front. She was an accepted leader even in Karnataka. She was active in Dakshin Kannada District women's movement and was instrumental to begin AIDWA in Karnataka. Dr. P.K.R. Warriar also joined her in these activities in Karnataka.

Not only was Devaki a remarkable political activist, but her contributions extended to studies in social science also. She took active part in the work of 'Social Scientist' monthly journal published from Thiruvananthapuram.

## **Building organisations**

As part of the 'pen down' strike organised against the dismissal of an employee at the Accountant General's Office, Thiruvananthapuram, some of the women officers were expelled from their hostels in the city. At that time there were only a few women's hostels in Thiruvananthapuram. It became an immediate need of the leadership to find a place for these officers to reside. Devaki managed to find a place to accommodate them with the help of her comrades.

These issues initiated the discussion for an organisation for women officers in the city. She provided leadership to organise the women employees in the city under the banner of the Working Women's Association. The Association runs a working women's hostel and a short-stay home for women who are excluded from their houses for various reasons. The short-stay home for women functions as the temporary residence for women who suffer violence and abuse. They have the facility to stay there until the problem is resolved. These institutions and their functioning contain in them examples and instances that speak volumes about her attitude towards the marginalised and the destitute.

Her enthusiasm and creative solutions were transmitted to others to encourage activities for the common cause of well being of women and society. It was under her leadership that the Working Women's Association started a Care Home for poor cancer patients — who come for treatment in the Regional Cancer Centre at Thiruvananthapuram — and also for their relatives who visit them from faraway places.

## **Unwavering strength of will**

As a social activist, Devaki Warrier symbolises all that should be imbibed by the coming generation. Her remarkable courage in confronting life is incomparable. Her life is a simple message to society, teaching every human being the morals of simple living and equanimity. She stands unique among others in that she even won over her opponents with her calm attitude and poignant smile.

She was a successful mother and wife. Devaki's busy social life never came in the way of fulfilling any of her responsibilities as a partner and a mother. She died on 25 December, 2001 after treatment for cancer for over two years. She fulfilled her duties to society during her life with utmost dedication and commitment. Her memory will be a constant source of inspiration for the new generation of activists in the women's movement to proceed in their struggles with unwavering strength of will.

# Niruben Patel

Gujarat



## **An illustrious family**

Born in 1926, Niruben belonged to a very well-known family. Her father Jivrajbhai Patel was a renowned agricultural scientist and a reputed farmer. He was the recipient of National *Rashrapati Chandrak* for his research. He was honoured by the President of India and was specially flown in to Delhi at that time. While her mother, Shardaben, was a well-known nationalist teacher in Dhandhuka, her eldest brother Dr Surendra J. Patel was an economist and one of UNCTAD's six topmost officers. Her other two brothers, Dr. Vithubhai Patel and Dr. Vallabhbai Patel, were also exceptionally successful in their respective fields of research. It was a family of intellectuals who had resources to live in the lap of luxury. Away from all this, Niruben found her own vocation in "left politics" and later also married Gujarat's senior Communist leader, Subodh Mehta.

## **Education and Gandhi's call**

At the age of 12, Niruben was part of a group that had prepared to blow up the bridge of Bhimnath near Dhandhuka of Ahmedabad

district. It was in support of the concurrent kisan movement led by one Bhajibhai of the Kisan Sabha who was a whole-time leader of the Communist Party at that time. It was done so that in case the movement became militant, the government would not be able to immediately send soldiers on a train to curb it. Even though she got arrested owing to a mistake, her spirit was not dampened even at that time.

She joined Bombay's Wilson College and passed M.A, L. L. B. Though she was a topmost Wilsonian of her time, she gave up her education in Bombay at the call of Gandhiji to "leave studies and join the national movement". She was unhesitant and immediately did so. Her own caste "leuva kunabi" had even awarded her a silver vessel for being its first lady graduate. Her participation in wage struggles for women's and workers' empowerment started at the young age of 20. Later, Niruben was to become state President of Gujarat Janwadi Mahila Sangh, member of Gujarat State Secretariat of CPI (M) and national executive member of AIDWA.

### **An equal partnership**

Neither Niruben nor Subodh believed in traditional marriage wherein the woman takes seven oaths of obedience to the husband. So they abandoned the "*saptapadi*" of Indian marriage and held a big public meeting. They made four simple promises: 1. of mutual fidelity; 2. of fidelity to nation; 3. of fidelity to working class; 4. of fidelity to progeny. The entire expenditure of this formality of marriage was Rs 60. Comrade Vajubhai Shukla — the then Communist Party State Secretary — pronounced the oath for them in the presence of a judge in the public meeting.

Their loving supporters knew the couple would not accept any gifts. So they secretly managed to get hold of the key to their house and filled it with things that would be needed to run a house. Both

the comrades were compelled to keep the presents given with such affection.

What is also noteworthy was that earlier, the two of them had begun staying together in a "commune" with four-five other comrades and though they started sharing their lives, there was not a moment when they thought of being together in wedlock. However, when Comrade A. K. Gopalan visited Bhavnagar for Maha-Gujarat Movement, he saw them and over dinner at a worker's house, he made Niruben and Subodh sit near him. He then blessed both of them with his hands on their heads and exclaimed "Do you understand what this means!"

They took the hint and within a week got married. Drawing from their example, their son Comrade Arun Mehta also married Comrade Iva Mehta in a similar ceremony. The two of them have also been whole timers in the Communist movement.

### **Bhavnagar Mahila Sangh**

Till her last breath Niruben remained an ardent communist and a leader of women. Her method of work amidst women was such that apart from serving her cause or addressing their grievances, Niruben also inspired the women politically. So women joined her work and organization with vigour and dedication. She was a woman who could quickly build an organization and that is how she built the Bhavnagar Mahila Sangh.

As part of her work for the Sangh, she also got built its 3-storey office, which has its branches in areas with lively membership and activity. It also has a "legal wing" and during Niruben's lifetime, there were Mahila Municipal Councillors superintending sewing centres with workers round-the-clock. These exist till today with a large membership. Owing to the efforts made by Niruben, Mahila Samitis had sprung up in many districts of Gujarat. She remained the

Communist Party secretary of Bhavnagar and participated in municipal elections.

She won as Councillor every time and at last became the municipal president of the first Anti-Congress municipality wherein all the eleven Communist Party contestants had won. During her one-year tenure as president, she initiated and completed a long list of works, including building latrines for slum-dwellers, rain *baseras* for the homeless, free milk to poor children, etc.. When the city got flooded, all the Councillors — including Niruben — waded through the waters to save people.

Niruben was invited to Helsinki (Finland) to attend the World Peace Council. When she returned, people from 10 villages flocked to honour her. While in Europe, she had lost her sitting bone and walked with extreme difficulty. However, the overwhelming support encouraged her to continue her work. At Helsinki she presented a detailed study paper on the condition of women in India. The international gathering acknowledged the successful struggles that she led.

### **Lioness of Saurashtra**

At that time Uchharang Dhebar was the chief minister and Rasiklal Parikh the Home Minister of the state of Saurashtra. The government had realized that kisans required ample water supply to reap better crops. However, under the law which the government adopted, kisans had to pay a hefty sum for the water supply. Taxes were imposed on peasants in the area. There was resistance as even those kisans who could not get any water were compelled to pay this “betterment levy”. A movement against the “betterment levy” started. The Upleta-Kolki village area of Madhya Saurashtra was known to be the stronghold of Congress leader and chief minister Dhebarbhai. However, the same people turned hostile and this area became the epicentre of this movement.

While in the beginning this long-drawn struggle saw great participation from the Congress kisans, they gradually left this movement. The only consistent support came from Shri Dolubha Jadeja who systematically led the movement and the *satyagraha*, and remained with Niruben throughout the struggle. His entire village of Vadodara also stood by Niruben.

Other communist leaders involved in the struggle were Com. Vajubhai Shukla, Com. Shantilal Vasa, and Com. P. D. Gandhi. Niruben’s personality won such admiration that she earned the popular title of the “Lioness of Saurashtra” (*Saurashtra ni Sinhan*). This was essentially because the entire police force of the state could not arrest her even once, despite a warrant to arrest her.

The effort to arrest her, along with Comrade Vajubhai Shukla, was intensified. Home Minister Rasiklal Parikh with a large number of police officers gheraoed the entire Upleta Taluka area. But Niruben quickly changed her attire after the public meeting and escaped. Infuriated, the police once rushed to the platform while she was speaking. However, her alert supporters immediately put the lights out in order to help her escape yet again. The people started celebrating and danced with joy after she escaped. However, the warrant against her was not withdrawn and Comrade Dolubha escorted her to Bhavnagar clad in a kisan boy’s dress evading police surveillance.

The struggle against the “betterment levy” made such a deep impact that for the next three consecutive terms the Upleta municipal elections were won by the communists and a very firm base of the Kisan Sabha could be formed in the area.

### **Anti-sales tax movement**

Another important, widespread and successful struggle was the anti-sales tax struggle of the entire merchant class of Saurashtra. Almost each bazaar of the state took part in this to get the sales tax

imposed by the Congress withdrawn. Various mercantile *hartals*, mass *satyagrahas* and civil disobedience programmes ultimately resulted in total *gherao* of the legislative assembly of the state government in Rajkot. This *gherao* was led by Niruben, Vajubhai Shukla, Sardar Prithvisinhji, Subodh Mehta, P. D. Gandhi, Tulsidas Poriya and others. This type of “*gherao*” of the Assembly was new in those days and evoked widespread interest. The struggle, however, could not succeed because students, kisans, women and workers could not be mobilized to the extent required.

### University struggle

A controversy erupted in 1967 over the issue of starting a university either at Rajkot or Bhavnagar. As the government decided on Rajkot, Bhavnagar rose in protest — so much so that the then finance minister Jagubhai Parikh locked the doors of the district Congress office and ordinary Congress members resigned en masse.

The Communists quickly took charge to mitigate the damage caused by this. Niruben, Subodh and Pravin Shridharani became the only leaders (apart from Swatantra Party of those days) who came forward. Initially the state remained indifferent, but as the struggle developed, students in thousands came out on the streets and all the leaders were arrested. The movement expanded and eventually the elected MLAs were forced to withdraw their support to the ruling Congress. However, the political drama began when elected Congress MLAs from Bhavnagar realized that if they resigned, the Swatantra Party would get a majority. So instead, the MLAs decided to meet the jailed comrades after working out a compromise formula. It was decided that Bhavnagar would get the status of “residential university”.

The “residential university” still exists and it is to a large extent due to the guiding role played by Niruben and Subodh in the movement.

### Anti-dowry and other movements

Niruben led the anti-dowry struggle so intensively that at several places dowry already given was returned. The movement covered women in the entire state and at the initiative of Niruben as many as 52 women’s organizations took part in the struggle. Comrade Dolubha Jadeja of Upleta took Niruben to two villages where even the “darbars” that had been notorious for dowry had voluntarily given up the practice altogether and those who gave or accepted dowry were excommunicated from the caste group. Niruben congratulated them personally by visiting them.

Earlier, she also led the Div (Diu) Mukti Andolan to liberate Div from Portugal’s domination. What also remains memorable is her successful struggle against bus fare rise in rural areas of Gariadhar wherein complete villages had collectively marched to court arrests in 1957. Her hunger strike at the Jahangir Mill gate carrying her infant child became a memorable struggle for the working class which forced Vinoba Bhave to intervene in favour of the workers in 1958.

Under the auspices of the Bhavnagar Mahila Sangh — founded by Niruben and later affiliated to AIDWA — the literacy campaign gained huge success in Bhavnagar and Gujarat was awarded the first position among the states by the Central government. In a felicitation, chief minister Babubhai Patel awarded Niruben for her work in this sphere. Niruben’s leadership also won the Bhavnagar Mahila Sangha a national award with prize money of Rs. 10,000 from the President. Of India. The government of India recognized her work in the field of adult education. She was honoured by the coveted Dr. Madhuriben Shah award of 1993 for her activities in the field of women’s lives and problems as well as adult education. She was felicitated at a special state-level function at Bardoli.

Niruben’s intervention in the cultural realm involved two major events. One was the ‘*Ras Garba Competition*’ at Bhavnagar in

which 52 garba groups took part. The other was the 'Safdar Hashmi Memory Campaign' started after the killing of the well-known champion of street theatre by Congress goons.

Nationwide programmes were undertaken and Niruben, too, organized the 12-day campaign in which six programmes were organised at the state level. The Bhavnagar group could contribute sizeable funds to Delhi.

The women workers of the Mahila Sangh in Bhavnagar actively campaigned in blood donation programmes as well by first contributing blood themselves. Niruben was also the secretary of Gujarat state-level international year of the child organization comprising the federation of 32 social institutions in 1989.

### **Bidding Adieu**

She breathed her last on May 5, 1994 at Saurashtra nursing home following a cardiac attack. She was admitted there ten days before for acute hepatitis-A. Her liver and kidneys had stopped functioning. Niruben left behind her a complete organizational edifice of service and struggle for the women as much as for the Left and revolutionary politics. Her condolence procession saw a sea of humanity as over 45,000 people participated — from all walks of life, cutting across parties, women, workers, kisans, small traders, shopkeepers, among others. The shutters of all shops were down in the city.

A prolific writer, Niruben has written articles and booklets on the International Women's Year and International Children's Year. She wrote on "dowry and the story of women's slavery" in Gujarati. Through her creative activities she built well-knit organizations, and pulled in thousands of people through non-formal education, sewing and knitting units, cultural programmes, including street plays and women's sport competitions.

In her day to day activity she took up a large number of court cases as well as women's defence committee activities. In this way she tried to offer whatever legal assistance was possible to fight for women's grievances and difficulties. What deserves special mention is the fact that women under her guidance have been coming outside the four walls of the home, and the women's movements as well as political organisations have witnessed an increasing participation by women from diverse backgrounds.

# Sukhamati Debbarma

Tripura



## Childhood

Sukhamati's father Chandrabadan Debbarma was an affluent farmer. He used to trade in jute. But he also took active part with Gana Mukti Parishad in the peasant movement against the extortion of 'Titun', a special kind of tax and also protested against exploitation by Mahajans (moneylenders). Later, he became the member of the CPI (M) sub-divisional committee of Kamalpur, Tripura. It was Sukhamati's mother, Daibaki Debbarma, who encouraged her husband to take part in such political work. Inspired by her parents' life and work, Sukhamati, too, started her journey in the sphere of politics and women's emancipation.

Comrade Chandrabadan Debbarma had four sons and two daughters. Among them Sukhamati was the eldest. She lived in Harinmara para village and used to walk to her school, the Kulaiganj Chowdhuri School. There were no roads at that time and she would take the narrow passage running through the fields.

Sukhamati was inspired by her father's ideology from her childhood. She protested against a marriage proposal for herself when she was just 14 years old. But it was a widely practiced custom

in society, especially at that time. She passed class VI and got married to Harendra Debbarma, who was also a member of the Communist Party, later joining the CPI (M). They have two daughters.

### **Political Work in Tripura**

The people's movement, and especially the women's movement, in Tripura has been built through the years by the unrelenting efforts of many women. While some of the earlier leaders are no more, there are others who have continued the struggle for their rights and livelihood in the face of utmost hardship and challenges. Though a very small number of women who are part of the democratic movement in Tripura have received formal education, they have exceptional political awareness. With a remarkable understanding of politics, they have always been able to identify the adversary without ever having to compromise with their ideology. One such luminary of the movement is Sukhamati, who devoted her life to strengthening the women's movement in Tripura. Though it has become difficult for Sukhamati to move around in her old age, she has kept her work going in every way possible.

She took part in the activities of the democratic women's movement even though she had to leave her small children at home. Initially, she worked with GMP and Krishak Sabha. Thereafter, she started working actively with the Left women's organization which was subsequently merged into AIDWA. The Left Front government had not been formed during that period in Tripura. It was not easy to carry out Party work during that period.

During the turbulent years when the Congress government was in power in the state, poor people were exploited by the moneylenders. Forced levies were imposed on the poorest of the poor. The exploitation by the Mahajan subjected the poor to a miserable existence. The problem was so acute that hunger, poverty

and exploitation were forcing tribal mothers to sell off their children. Lack of food had become the norm in Tripura at that time.

Sukhamati emerged as a leader during the course of a people's movement which began by registering protest against the apathy of the Congress government to the situation in the state. She initiated a movement to demand equal wages for men and women. During Congress rule, there was huge difference between the wages of a man and a woman. Sukhamati began by organizing protests against the difference in wages. She organized the people and led deputations to the block with that demand. Sukhamati also organized the tribal and Manipuri women to demand twine/thread for weaving, through the platform of Mahila Samiti. She was attacked several times for launching such protests against the government. She was beaten by the CRPF officers who dealt heavy blows on her back. However, her strong will never faltered. She also took part, along with the government employees, in the movement against Emergency rule. She used to hide booklets and membership folios for her organization underneath vegetables in a big container and travelled from one village to another. This was how she fought for women's liberation.

In 1978, the Left Front government was formed in Tripura and the reactionary forces conspired to break the peace and harmony between the tribals and non-tribals of Tripura. They organized a riot in Tripura in 1980. Many tribals and non tribals lost their lives and homes in the riot. Thousands of people were forced to take shelter in camps. During this period Sukhamati played an important role in order to maintain peace and harmony between the tribal and non-tribal people of Tripura. She collected donations for the people in camps and also provided shelter in her own house to the victims. She organized the people of Tripura, especially of the hill area, and conducted meetings with her colleagues from the women's

organization for maintaining peace and harmony. She faced several threats for her work but she never once compromised on her ideology. Sukhamati is known to the people of Tripura as 'Didi' for her work and dedication.

### **Not afraid of threats**

When the state was under the Congress rule and torn by terrorist upheavals, she was threatened with death a number of times. But Sukhamati was undaunted. The extremist terrorists in Tripura had been creating problems in many ways, especially to stall the development of Tripura in respect of education, health, women's equality, etc. The objective of these activities was to create mutual suspicion and break the harmony between the tribals and non-tribal people. The extremists killed democratic leaders to create an atmosphere of terror. They also threatened to bring to a halt the progress of democracy in Tripura. The women of Tripura were the worst sufferers as they were ordered to seek permission from the extremists even to bear children. It was an excruciating time and Sukhamati was successful in her endeavour to maintain peace and performed an appreciable role. She completed her duties skirting danger and death to maintain peace and harmony in the total sub-divisional area of Kamalpur.

In 1988, the Congress and TUJS Party came to power once again. During their five-year rule they perpetuated and created semi-fascist terror in Tripura. They provoked an atmosphere of fear to create hurdles for democratic activities and also threatened the women's organization. During the Congress and TUJS alliance the women of tribal and backward classes had to suffer a great deal. The village of Sukhamati was also affected. But she never desisted from performing her duties to the people of Tripura as well as to her organization. She led the democratic movement during that time without fear and with great political acumen.

### **Involvement in AIDWA**

She started her work with a tiny women's unit at Kamalpur. But gradually her activities spread throughout the region. She secretly collected the membership of AIDWA during the rule of the alliance government without any fear. When women were unable to give membership fees for AIDWA, they would offer vegetables, which Sukhamati later sold in the market to raise the membership fees.

Sukhamati attended the preparatory meeting of AIDWA in 1980, along with Comrade Rama Das and Comrade Ila Bhattacharjee. She has been the member of the central committee of AIDWA and is now the Vice-President of the state AIDWA in Tripura. She has been carrying out her responsibilities with an untiring zeal. She was also the President of AIDWA's Ambasa sub-division. In 1980, she took ill. *In spite of her illness, she continued to inspire party workers to do their best and contribute to people's welfare.*

She has always shown affection for all her comrades and loved to cook food for them. Sukhamati detested any form of negligence when it came to organizational work. *It pains Sukhamati today that she is unable to carry out party work due to her advancing age. She continues to play an inspiring role to many thousands in the women's movement.*

- ▶ JYOTI CHAKRABORTY
- ▶ JANAKI AMMAL
- ▶ M. SURYAVATHI
- ▶ DEVAKI WARRIER
- ▶ NIRUBEN PATEL
- ▶ SUKHAMATI DEBBARMA

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