

As twilight descends on the villages and *bastis* of Amravati district, a familiar figure can often be seen engaged in discussion with the village folk. The lady is Nalinitai Ladhke, district president of the Committee for Inquiry into Violence Against Women and tireless social activist who has devoted a lifetime to the cause of the downtrodden. Her work takes her to the remotest corners of the district. It often means endless cases, applications, visits to numerous offices, attempts at reconciliation. But then Nalinitai's sole mission is to reassure the poor that there is hope for them.

Her championship of the poor hasn't gone unrewarded. In 1977 she received the National Award for Teachers. In 1987 the Savitribai Phule Award was conferred on her for her contribution to the cause of women. Over the years countless women and women's institutes have called on her services. Nalinitai is a woman of many facets. A committed social activist, she has also taught at the primary and high school levels. She has even established a special school for the disabled. I have always looked upon Nalinitai as a kind of mentor and often wondered at the depth of her knowledge on a wide range of subjects. The subjects run the gamut from women's problems, especially those of rural women, primary and adult education, eradication of superstition, prohibition, anti-dowry programmes, actual handling of dowry deaths, to the new education policy, Dr Ambedkar's works, the Mandal report and even the improvement of student's handwriting.

Yet it has been a long and lonely struggle for Nalinitai to reach where she is today. Her maiden name was Punja Kale. She belonged to the nomadic Kolhati tribe of Maharashtra. The Kolhaties earn their living by acrobatic performances on the streets. As they move from town to town they are always on the fringes of society. They are even categorised as a criminal tribe. Not surprisingly Nalinitai has some

A Long Journey

Profile of Nalinitai Ladhke

by

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unpleasant memories about her persecution by the police.

Luckily for Nalinitai, her father wanted a more settled existence. A vegetarian and a teetotaler, unlike his kinsmen, he joined the Varkari community. The Varkaris are a sect of the Bhakti cult in Maharashtra who worship god Vitthala. With help and encouragement from some leading members of the village community she was able to complete her education up to class seven. But her relationship with her mother was strained from very early on. Her mother, unlike her father, stayed rooted in the culture of her community and did not like her daughter's reforming zeal.

She began her education at a primary school in a small village named Sategaon. But her lineage, shabby clothes, and unrefined Marathi instantly placed her at the lower end of the social ladder. Aside from study, there was hard agricultural labour—picking out weeds, digging out harmful roots and stumps of cotton plants. "The most difficult and harrowing tasks were, and always are, left for women," says Nalinitai as she looks back on her early years.

She later graduated through a course of private study. At the age of 15 since she was under age for teachers' training, she was appointed an untrained teacher in a one teacher school in Anjangaon village. Thus began a long, arduous journey which was to test Nalinitai's mettle constantly.

As she grew older she began to question the status quo: Who created

castes? Who deprived men and women of their fundamental rights? In her early childhood she had suffered silently and accepted caste discrimination as her lot. Later, however, when she was older she realised that mere resignation was not the answer. Thus began her struggle for the restoration of the rights of the downtrodden.

In 1942 she married Anandraoji Ladhke. Anandraoji came from a different caste and the marriage was arranged by a well-wisher who himself was behind bars at the time. All through his life, Anandraoji worked for the Rastrabhasha Prachar for a token salary of Rs 10. They have two sons and two daughters.

The person she remembers most warmly is her neighbour and friend, Mrs Kottigiri, who belongs to an orthodox Karnataka Brahmin family and is a child widow. Even though this woman remained theoretically committed to the dogmas of her caste, in actual practice she supported and took care of Nalinitai in many ways including those that involved breaking her caste taboos. This Brahmin widow cooked for her children while she went out to work not caring about her supposed high caste status.

Nalinitai has never lost sight of her mission. Despite old age, illness, and material hardship her spirit remains indomitable. Through heat and dust she travels. In the evenings meetings are convened since the *basti* and village dwellers only have time when the day's labour is over. But when they see her they know that they have found a life long friend. □