

‘Education is the only Choli-Bangadi I am Giving to my Daughters’


Sindhu Suradkar

Abstract: *Intergenerational conversations in emancipatory movements empower each new generation with the pedagogy about who we are. Both the unchanging and changing aspects of the social structures are transmitted through these conversations. Sindhu Suradkar has been a community worker from the time she completed her studies, here, she is in conversation with Pradnya Garud. The memories of her natal and marital families, and their role in shaping her values and social commitments forms a large part of this exchange.*

Pradnya Garud: Jai Bhim, Kaki! We know you as Pradnya Jadhav’s mother, through her writings we know about her parents’ role in the social movements in central Maharashtra. Today, we would like to hear about your life in your words.

Sindhu Suradkar: Jai Bhim, Pradnya! I was born in a place where there was nothing available, it was a small place in western Maharashtra. My parents didn’t know the date of my birth; it was our neighbours who admitted me to the school. When the school asked for my date of birth they were told I was born in the month of June because June is also the time when new academic year begins.

After my admission I started going to the school, but later they realised I looked quite young so they stopped letting me attend the school. Whenever they told me to go home, I used to stand in front of the school gate till the school timings got over, it became my routine almost for the next 8 days. Finally, they allowed me to attend the school. According to the date given in school documents I was of the age to attend the school.

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I don't exactly remember how my first year at the school went; I think I was too young then. My parents used to go to work. My mother would leave the house early in the morning and she would take all of us to her work site in the farm; she would bathe us there and then send us all to the school. We had goats and chickens at home; I used to look after them. My elder brother never liked going to the school. He used to play for the entire school time from morning to evening, we would leave the house together to go to school, but instead of reaching the school, he would keep his school bag with me and go to play and return only by the time school got over. It was his secret which he would ask me not to reveal to our parents. But our father was very concerned about our education, although he himself was unschooled; he used to visit our school regularly to ask teachers about our progress and attendance. He used to punish my brother for missing the school. He was well informed even in those days and was different from other people in the neighbourhood.

He would tell us—we don't own any material property; education is our only property. These days we see how people have disputes over property shares even between siblings, but there will be no one to demand a share from what you learn through education, there will be no one to demand a share of your educational property, it will remain with you forever.

Whatever I will say today, it will be majorly about my parents, since it is because of them I am able to come to this stage. My father believed that education would bring us a bright future, the days of subsistence living will be gone. In Maharashtra Choli-Bangadi [a blouse and bangles] for the daughter in a family has tremendous value, it is an honour that brothers and father give to their daughter. When people saw my father was unable to fulfil this, they would ask him to put a full stop to our educational expenses. At that time, he used to tell them—Education is the only Choli-Bangadi I am giving to my daughters, and this will remain with them forever. I am doing this so they become independent, and will not have to rely on their brothers or their parents. They will make their own life. And to no surprise, whatever my father had envisioned has come to be! I could earn and preserve my self-respect. I know, no work is less or undignified, but I always feel we should strive for something better.

We were a big family; as the family expanded more responsibilities came onto my shoulders. As my elder brother was very quiet, and always lived in his own world, I would have to manage even the monetary matters, for instance if sometimes there would be no ration at home, it used to be my job to see how that would be gained. Asking neighbours for ration was never an option. I would mortgage our copper utensils and buy ration. The situation was indeed very critical.

School was quite far from our house it was a 25 minute walk. Secondary school was even farther. After completing 7th grade I had to go extra miles to attend school. It was around 15 km away from our home. Many girls from our locality had dropped out since the distance between home and the school was too much. I was the only one from our locality who went to attend secondary school. When my 8th standard began my father faced a lot of opposition from the villagers, everyone told him it is of no use to give education to daughters, ultimately they go to someone

else's home. Despite this, my schooling did not get affected; my father never reconsidered his decision and only encouraged me. So, I continued going to school and somehow completed my matriculation, being the first girl from our community in that area.

My father never let anything fall short on us, there were days we would live on just water but we never asked for help. Self-respect is above all; at times we took a loan but never asked for help. That was how we were raised. My father was a tractor driver in the State Agriculture Department. There was a time we would wait until our father arrived, he would bring maize, jowar or bajra, we used to cook the grains and eat. My mother would tell us that whenever a baby was born in our family, the birth of the new-born was celebrated on the 12th day, it was called Baravi, [12th day]. My father would celebrate the day with great enthusiasm; he would invite singers who sang bhimgeets [songs eulogising Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar]. Because we were 5 daughters, people used to say, why educate the daughters? But my mother was very upfront, she would say, be it a girl or a boy, a mother goes through the same intensity of pain while giving birth so why should we bother much. I feel my mother was named rightly—her name was Savitri and she lived like Savitri. 15 years ago my father passed away and a year after that my mother left too. In our lifetime we never saw them fighting or arguing with each other. My mother was very calm but very strict with us. She used to sing beautifully, tears would stream down listening to her voice -- it was so deep. She used to compose and sing Ovyas [short poems/verses recited in Marathi] in praise of Babasaheb, especially when she ground the grains on the stone grinder. I feel immensely proud of my parents because they gave us everything—education, vision despite being unschooled themselves.

We lived in Changdeonagar, a labour camp of workers who had migrated to that place from different villages in Marathwada to work at the sugar factory. It was located 15 km away from the main village. My mother never looked back; she only encouraged us to pursue our education. She would tell us, there will be time to learn household work, to make Bhakaris [jowar-breads] but the time for going to school will never return. There was freedom to make friends, our parents trusted us always. I learnt this from my mother, and that is how I raised my own daughter too. If my mother could have thought like that almost 40-50 years ago, why wouldn't it come to me?

We had only heard of the practices of untouchability, for instance our people were not allowed to wear chappals when they passed by the Veshi [entrance gate of the village], we never had any such experience. I think the practice of untouchability was not the same across Maharashtra, it was in different forms. It was much stronger in Marathwada, and since we had migrated to western Maharashtra we never had to face it. Maybe because the place where we lived had a community of our people, and why would they follow untouchability with our own people?

Even my grandmother, my mother's mother, told us stories that our people were not allowed to wear footwear whenever they passed through the main village. Our women would have to look down if they happen to see a Maratha man.

Rahul Gaikwad: How long was this in practice for? Was it there even after Babasaheb's demise?

Sindhu Suradkar: Yes, it was. In fact, when I passed class 12th I visited my maternal village called Aadgaon, in Sillod taluka [in Marathwada] and one day as I was walking I saw a Hanuman Temple and entered the premises. What happened after that was a big event!

The whole village gathered in front of my grandparents' house, it was only after a few minutes I had entered the temple. They were saying I should be beaten up for entering the temple—while this discussion was going on I asked them if I had done any damage to that temple, or I stole something from there. If the answer is yes, then they can beat me. The Sarpanch of the village said, 'for all the life you have lived away from the village, you left the village and don't know the customs, traditions and the rules meant for you all'? I asked him 'What rules? Does your god made with stone know who touched him? What caste that person belongs to? It is a stone and not a living being.' I told them if they answered my question I would be fine with whatever they would say; I told them to take me to the police station or beat me up but first answer my questions. The Sarpanch said 'Since you went to school, you have become ignorant of the norms'; he didn't say anything after that but I went ahead and said 'If you don't answer then I am going to lodge a police complaint against you for the verbal abuse you hurled at me, and the way you spoke to me, for the casteist remarks you threw at me'. The Sarpanch said 'Oh, will you do that? Don't you remember your father was our bonded servant' I asked him 'So what do you want to suggest? Should I also do that and be your servant? Those days are gone, it is your time to come and work at my home now'. He couldn't say much but he just said—Kaduba's daughter has become very sharp and clever—I told him we were always like that but you people have exploited us. While this was going on somebody told the Sarpanch 'It would be better to leave otherwise she will put us all behind bars, there will be serious legal charges against us'. He felt insulted and left from there. This was when I was just out of my class 12th.

I came to Aurangabad for further studies; it was my father's dream that his children get their education from colleges founded by Babasaheb. It seems my father was longing for it; it was some kind of a dream for him to study in Babasaheb's colleges. The first few days in Aurangabad were extremely difficult, it started with finding a place to stay, soon after reaching there. I went to college without slippers; when I received my first scholarship I bought a pair of footwear for myself. My father's economic condition was not so good; however, he made sure all our educational needs were fulfilled. People used to tell him, if he sent his daughters to Majuri [daily wage labour] there would never be any shortage of money, but my father would say—once the age of education is gone it never returns, if they get an education now, they will have their whole life to earn money. The way my father saw education was—he was not interested whether we would get a job after being educated or not, he was more concerned about the image education might

create for us. He used to say, ‘if you go to any office, the officer there must offer you a chair, and treat you with respect; it is the education that makes a huge difference.’ With many ups and downs we completed our education, because we were 9 siblings and our parents were unable to fulfil everyone’s demands but they made sure all of us at least graduated.

I was the elder among the siblings, and even though I had one brother older to me, and as I said he was never interested in education, therefore, there was no one to guide me through my educational journey and I mostly learnt things through my own exploration. When I passed the matriculation our relatives wanted me to get married, they even fought with my parents to make us do that, but my parents did not change their decision. Especially my mother, she was a very calm person by nature, but committed to get her children educated. She wouldn’t let us cook, and do the household work, because she felt if we work we wouldn’t get time to study. Until we completed our matriculation none of us sisters knew cooking, it is only after that she started to teach us cooking just so that if a time came when we needed to live by ourselves we would be able to feed ourselves and not be dependent on others. For me she was like Savitrimai Phule, and my father was also like that, when I completed graduation a cousin of mine told my father that she can take admission in MBA but I wanted to study M.Com, and my father didn’t interfere in my decision. I took admission in M.Com and later did a Master in Social Work at the university. I worked in an NGO for almost 3 years. By this time my elder brother had got married. Then, I brought all my younger siblings to Aurangabad and we started staying together.

The Namantar movement was at its peak when I was studying in Ambedkar college and we used to attend the processions, demanding for the name change of the Marathwada University. I also went to jail for it several times. When I was in the village, there was no one to tell us what exactly Babasaheb’s contribution was, but after coming to Aurangabad I got to learn about Babasaheb in more depth. Until we were in the village we only knew about Babasaheb’s educational journey and how strenuous it was, and it was through Waman dada’s [Waman Dada Kardak] songs. This was our only inspiration to study, we used to listen in the songs, how difficult it was for Babasaheb to get education and with what commitment he endured his hard journey. Only with this inspiration all of us—5 sisters and 4 brothers completed graduation.

After 3 years of my job, I got married in 1989; my husband was also an activist. We both worked in the same organisation before our marriage. I joined another job after marriage in Municipal Corporation as the community organiser; by this time my daughter was born. I used to take her along to my work; it mostly involved working with women at the grassroots. My area of work primarily involved working with Muslim women and it was very difficult back then to get them to talk. I used to work for making women more aware about the government’s women related schemes and their implementation.

Me and my husband used to take our daughter to our work, since she was very young. My husband would pick her up after school and take her to some sabha. It was never intentional but it was

required, she needed to be looked after. I never put any restrictions on her. Many people say why only one daughter—but I had been through that phase where things get shared when the family is large, it brings burdens along and not everyone gets everything. We wanted to make sure everything our child needs should be fulfilled. We wanted our daughter to know how our community was, how people lived, she was not pampered just because she was the only daughter.

My husband passed away due to a brain tumour; the time he was diagnosed with cancerous brain tumour was also the time my daughter had received a scholarship award and it was an opportunity for her to go abroad. People said many things; few said she should stay back since her father's health is fragile. I was firm on letting her go, because it was a rare opportunity she had earned. It was a hard decision for me, but I had to let her go. Within a few months after she left, her father died. She never got to see him again. When she returned after a month of his passing people started telling me to get her married, because they were concerned about how I was going to manage alone? But how was that a solution? I never wanted my daughter to stop her education. I am happy the way she has progressed on her own. I just stood behind her; there were some dreams I had for myself and now I will live them through my daughter's development in her field. As a parent, I gave up on opportunities that would have advanced my career, me and my husband both decided to stay where we were and do the best we could do. All we wanted was to be with our people, it has been rewarding in many ways. We have been able to earn so much goodwill from the people we worked with. Today, even after my retirement, all the women with whom I started my work remember me, we are in touch with each other, they acknowledge the work I did and I value the experience I gained working with them. I am very satisfied with my life. More than money, I was able to build meaningful relations with so many people. All the women I worked with were from marginalised backgrounds, but they overcame them on many fronts. They are so self-sufficient now that they know all the bank procedures, some of them even went to Thailand and other countries; they say it is because of you we became self-dependent. I am happy I contributed to their life through my work.

Pradnya Garud: Can you tell us about the Namantar movement?

Sindhu Suradkar: It was when I was in college; the agitations were going on. Aurangabad was the centre of the movement. Jogendra Kawade had organised a long march, many people would come to Aurangabad to take part in the agitations; we hid some women in our hostels, shared food with them. One day we went near the gate, police did a lathi-charge, took us to jail, later they released us. It was all before I got married. We did have a background in what our father taught us, he himself did not know much about Babasaheb, because our region was so remote and away from towns. Whatever we knew it was all because of the songs of Waman Dada Kardak, Prahlad Shinde - their songs depicted the life of Babasaheb and Ramai in front of us, how they built their life, what is their contribution to the society; songs were the only medium to learn.

Those songs were mostly about Babasaheb and Ramai, we did not know much about Mahatma Phule through songs. But as we grew up and started to read, we got introduced to him through the textbooks. Our parents knew about Phule as the person who opened a water well for the untouchables. Today's generation has heard about Savitrimai but the generation of my parents didn't know much about her, only that someone would tell how she was attacked for opening a school for girls. I feel as much we speak about Ramai we should speak about Savitrimai too.

This is how I got involved in the movement, attending public meetings, processions, taking part in the student campaigns. I could never go to the stage and speak because I had never done that before. I felt I didn't have the courage. But, in the public meetings I used to take part; this journey continued even after marriage in rather solid form. At our home regular meetings used to take place.

The original demand of Namantar was never achieved. Namantar meant to be a complete change in the name—Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar University. Instead of that we were given a Name extension [Namavistar]. Our people wanted to acknowledge the work of Babasaheb and Namantar movement, in a way, was a tribute to his work here. There was a village near Jalna, Niklak Akola, where Savarnas had boycotted our people, they were denied work and groceries, and it was a tough time. Savarans saw Namantar as an opportunity to kill our people; it was their long-held anger against our people. Our people used innovative ways of achieving the demand for Namantar. Students used to receive letters from their family members, and as a campaign they asked their families to write “Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar University” as the address on those letters instead of “Marathwada University”. With a great deal of efforts our people intensified the struggle. It became so much more than Namantar later.

I do not have much study on it, my husband was into it. He was so well read. He had also worked with our people in Gujarat, especially in the aftermath of Godhra riots. He would exactly know the references in the books, his reading was vast. He was the most loved person, his way of engaging with people was exceptional, and he did it effortlessly. He loved music a lot; he knew many things about that too. If he just listened to a song he would tell me which movie and year the song was from. I couldn't get there much, my daughter has acquired certain traits from him. She developed an interest in reading. At home, most discussions were about books and on Babasaheb and Buddha. Although my husband didn't take much interest in Buddhism as a religion; he was critical about meditation and all, which they now propagate as Buddha's philosophy. He would tell us why we have to worship the idol? We are not Hindus, he never liked putting the neel on the forehead because for him it was merely replacing red vermilion with blue colour. We both worked in the same organisation, but on different projects. After three years he proposed for marriage through his friend and we got married.

When we got married my mother-in-law got a mangalsutra for me. At that time, he said, he needs one Mangalsutra too because he was also getting married so why would only his wife wear the

mangalsutra. We only signed registration papers in our wedding, no rituals were performed. My father was a bit apprehensive because it was going to be the marriage of his first daughter but the marriage took place and he also didn't bother much later. Many friends and colleagues attended our wedding.

Pradnya Garud: How was Kaka's involvement in the movement?

Sindhu Suradkar: He was fully engrossed in the Namantar Andolan. He was a very influential personality of his time. When they needed to disturb the public addresses of the people in the opposition, my husband was called in to perform that task. He did many such activities, not letting the public meetings take place. He was jailed several times, and got released. He was under shadow watch of the police in those days. When the long march was organised in Aurangabad to demand for the name change [of Marathwada University], people from outside of Aurangabad and even Maharashtra would come in to join the march and the protests, Police had sealed the entry points of Aurangabad. My husband and his friends would change their appearance to beguile the police and help people enter the city. All these people who came from outside of Aurangabad were given shelter in our nagars where our people lived. Police used to beat people up even for gathering at a place. Once the Police beat up Jogendra Kawade, it was something that we witnessed ourselves.

Rahul Gaikwad: How was Kaka's family?

Sindhu Suradkar: My husband's father was an activist of Republican Party of India [RPI]. Whenever Babasaheb's Son Bhaiyyasaheb came to Aurangabad he would stay at our house for several days. My husband was raised in such an environment. Once there was some program at Bhadkal Gate and women from our area had contributed money as per their capacity—50 paisa, 1 rupee each—to stitch a coat for Bhaiyyasaheb, as he was the chief-guest for that program. My mother-in-law would tell us—all of them had migrated to Aurangabad when Milind College was under construction; people from our area would go there to work and to have a glimpse of Babasaheb. Because they knew Babasaheb was building those colleges. Most of them had seen Babasaheb. This was not the same for us because we were in western Maharashtra.

Pradnya Garud: What roles do writers have in the movement? What do you feel about it? I am asking this question since Kaka was a writer and your daughter also writes.

Sindhu Suradkar: I feel, to have appropriate documentation of the movement the writer's role becomes very important. Those who have worked and have been part of the movement their writings are important because it is a history they write to make the future generations aware.

What our community is, how it was earlier, how it progressed and passed each phase, to document this is the task of the writers, and they create future writers. The writers who were part of the movement, who have studied the movements closely, they inform future generations: Who were the people involved in the movement? What could be the meaning of the movement? What was each one's contribution? What is the truth and what is false? How the next generation will take it ahead. It is the writers who show the path and tell the history and politics of the time. The writers' role is also important in order to prevent certain types of unwanted events from happening, to study how the movement should take form.

Now we know about Buddhism because somebody has written about it and it has been passed on to us, like the Namantar andolan. Just knowing there was such a movement is not enough but to know it from inside is essential. You would be able to explore more when there is basic literature available; whether to discard it or agree with it you must know the history. That is where writers become important.

Pradnya Garud: What did writing mean to Kaka?

Sindhu Suradkar: For him it was everything, he wanted to bring together his reading on different issues in the form of a book. He wrote regular editorials in Marathwada, he used to go from village to village to address the public meetings and to celebrate Bhim Jayantis. He believed books could be preserved for the next several generations, books will educate the next generations about Babasaheb. He wanted to document the experiences of celebrating Jayantis among our people, the way they saw it as acts of creating history. Because for us Babasaheb is not there only on the 14th April or just to hold the blue flags, he was much more than that. My husband felt, if we didn't write the meaning of Babasaheb in our life how would the next generations learn about his multifaceted personality, his life? How would they be able to study him? As he wanted to write more he spent most of his time reading. He wanted to bring it out in some or the other form, book or small booklets. But it never happened, everything remained frozen in his mind.

I had a job and my husband wanted to write. It was my dream too, to see his books published. I was always free in our relationship, we were two individuals who could think independently and live as we wanted to, we both learnt from each other. My parents showed me the direction, but I learnt from my husband how to live a life in real sense. I used to be a part of the discussions at home but rarely I used to be interested, it was all part of life, there was no demarcation of personal and movement.

My daughter has inherited the habit of reading from her father, he would write notes whenever he thought of something. After his demise, we found many such notes written on small chits in the house. He was active in the initial days of the movement and later after our marriage too. But certain things happened which were a major setback to his social and political career. Many people

around him tried to support him, and he also struggled a lot. Someone did not live up to his trust and my husband felt betrayed, he could not take the fact that someone whom he supported could take away the only little amount he had saved, and broke his trust. It was more about the pace that he could not match with others, he was left behind and he started feeling lonely. At some point of time he used to feel his knowledge was not invested, and that his potential was used without any gain to him or to the movement. He was offered support but he denied it always.

He was full of life; he would never share if he felt anything was wrong. He took care of everyone around him. I feel pained thinking how his life ended. I feel he should have talked more. He used to tell me ‘madam, I will not die without publishing at least four books of mine’.

Once, around 10 pm in the night a few women I was working with came to our house, it was raining outside when they came. Because they came at an odd hour I didn’t quite appreciate it. After those women left he said ‘madam, we should never do this to anyone, they came to our house because they knew they would be welcomed, because they trust us.’ He was like that always! In the end, I only feel he shouldn’t have left the world in such circumstances.

Pradnya Garud: What is your advice to young writers?

Sindhu Suradkar: I feel your writing should expand, it should not remain limited, and it should only grow. And your writing should be in a form that is easy and accessible to any lay person, it should make sense to any common person. Your thoughts that you intend to spread must be written in a language that is not hard to understand no matter how critical your thoughts are, the language should be humble. Even today not many people know about Babasaheb, your writing should be addressed to such people, it should provoke them to think. This is my minimal expectation.

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