

Obituary

Sudhatai Varde (1930-2014): An Indian feminist committed to progressive and secular values, socialist and humanist ethos

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Sudhatai Varde was extremely lively, cheerful person with dream of egalitarian society in her eyes. She was petite, demure in her looks, at the same time, extremely forthright, upfront and dedicated to the cause of women's liberation. She passed away on 8th April, 2014 at the age of 84. Hers was a life lived for her commitment for progressive and secular values and socialist and humanist ethos.

Combination of Artistic Inclination and Nationalist Spirit

Right from her childhood she had great fascination for dancing. She used this talent for her social cause as a volunteer for Rashtra Seva Dal (RSD) which she joined as a teenager. She was involved in freedom movement thro' RSD. She met her soul-mate Shri. Sadanand Varde who was also a mainstay of RSD and in due course she married him. Both of them were gracious and full of life and remained active workers in the social movement as patriotic socialists.

In the post-independence period, Sudhatai played pivotal role in the development of Cultural wing of RSD. She also encouraged her daughter Jelum to be a classical dancer. She shared beautiful relationship with her daughter and always talked highly of her.

Women's Movement

Sudhatai was closely associated with Mrinaltai Gore, Kamaltai Desai and Pramilatai Dandwate. Sudhatai's involvement in women's movement began with Anti price rise struggles in the early 1970s. She participated in the anti-rape campaign in 1980. She attended all events of new women's groups in response to cyclostyed invitation sent by post to her residence in Bandra (W) which was

initially an office of Mahila Daxata Samiti (MDS). She worked for Anti-dowry agitations (1981), Brides are not for burning campaign, Parityakta Mukti Morcha (Deserted Women's Liberation Front), solidarity for textile strike (1982). In a campaign against dowry harassment, I remember Sudhatai shouting slogan against murderers of Manjushree Sarda and Vibha Shukla when we had protest demonstrations within Bombay High Court in 1988. She was a sympathiser of Swadhar that provided support to women in social distress. Sudhatai attended all shibirs, meetings, rallies, sit-ins and public meetings of united front of women's groups and state level coordination committee for women's liberation- Stree Mukti Andolan Sampark Samiti.

After communal riots in Bhivandi in 1984, women's organisations such as NFIW, AIDWA, MDS, SMS, Women's Centre, Forum Against Oppression of Women formed Committee Against Religious Fanaticism. Sudahtai was actively involved in the same. In 1987, she was with feminists to protest against emergence of sati temples in Mumbai and re-naming of road in suburban Mumbai as Maha Sati Road. As a representative of MDS she took active interest in Forum Against Sex Determination and Sex Selection. She attended study circles on technical issues such as implication of hormone based injectable contraceptives on women lives before joining the agitation against it. She was a supporter of Narmada Bachao Andolan.

During 1991 as a Director (I/C) of Research Centre for Women's Studies for a brief period, I had to organize a National Round Table on Women in Decision Making, I requested Sudhatai to present a status paper on Women in Decision Making in Western India. She was so overwhelmed with emotion and said, "It is so rewarding to feel that you, younger lot of firebrand feminists see value in our thinking!!" To prepare her paper, she came frequently visited RCWS Documentation Centre and went through all the reports, resolutions, books concerning the subject and made a brilliant presentation at the Round Table.

She was shaken by Mumbai riots in 1992 and in a meeting organized by Stree Mukti Sangahtan at Bhupesh Gupta Hall, she asked, "Where did my generation go wrong? How do you explain children of secular generation are turning out to be religious fanatics?" She made a resolve to focus more on Seva Dal's activities with children to change their mindset towards humanism.

In 1993, Both Sudhatai and Sadanandji founded Aple Ghar to care for orphans after earthquake in Latur.

When she came for 75th birth Anniversary function of Mrinaltai in 2003, Sudhatai looked frail. Two years back in the memorial meeting of Mrinaltai, I had her glimpse.

Sudhatai's inspiring and charming persona and flavor of her good deeds will have a lasting imprint on glorious HERSTORY of women's liberation movement in Maharashtra.

Vibuthi Patel
