



## The Power of One

*“I’ve taught my people to live again ...”*



## Maoist Violence Is Not Prabhavati's Way

*Manisha Prakash*

Jehanabad (Bihar): Peering into the classroom of the anganwadi centre in Bhitayan village, in Bihar's Jehanabad district, we could see a motherly figure giving instructions to her students. "Jump children. It helps in the development of muscles," she was saying. The children followed her instructions, bobbing up and down in neat rows. After the exercise, she asked them to sit down and recite a poem. Within minutes the small classroom echoed with young, sing-song voices reciting, "*Machchli jal ki rani hai...*" (Fish is the queen of the water), a popular rhyme in Hindi. Then regular class work began.

This was in 2009, when we visited Prabhavati Devi, who was in her mid-fifties. What struck us immediately was the manner in which she related to her students and how she could awaken curiosity in their young minds. Later, as lunch time came and the bell rang, the children rushed out to grab their plates and line up to be served a generous portion of their daily mid-day meal of *khichdi* (a preparation of rice and lentil). Their alert teacher made sure that no child was left out.

Day after day, this was Prabhavati's routine. At first glance, her simplicity was apparent and there was nothing particularly unusual about her other than the fact that she ran the *anganwadi* at Bhitayan meticulously. Yet, Prabhavati, who spoke only the local dialect *Magahi*, turned out to be nothing like the ordinary village woman she appeared. Hers, in fact, was a rather extraordinary life.

In 1971, at the age of seventeen, Prabhavati got married to a man who had a different approach to life: he was not bothered about mundane things like raising a family, but was engaged in a 'struggle of the oppressed' that often involved killing innocent people. He was a Maoist. So, whereas the average newly married woman around here chiefly spent her

time running her household, Prabhavati's early days as a young bride involved running away from the police. When we met her in 2009, Prabhavati was living alone in her brother-in-law's house in Shukulchak village. After living in fear and uncertainty for years, she had left her husband's home, which was located not too far away, because the police would regularly come and ransack it on the pretext of looking for her husband.

Although Prabhavati was all alone now, she felt that her life had a purpose. "I am fighting against ignorance by lighting lives with education and seeing to it that the poor get their due," she said, with a deep sense of satisfaction. Her efforts in this regard hadn't gone unrewarded: in August 2008, she was named the *Aadarsh Anganwadi Sevika* (Ideal Anganwadi Worker) of her village and then Jehanabad District Magistrate Sanjay Kumar Agraval presented her with a certificate for exemplary service.

When asked whether she missed her husband – the erstwhile chief of the Naxalite outfit, People's War Group in Bihar and later a central committee member of the banned Communist Party of India (Maoist), the dreaded Dev Kumar Singh alias Arvind Kumar alias Vikas – her reply was terse and quick, "I know what the future holds. He may be gunned down or jailed some day. I have accepted life the way it is."

There is a long list of crimes attached to Dev Kumar Singh's name. He is an accused in over twenty-five cases of violence and the alleged killings of several feudal lords and police personnel, including the assassination of eight Central Reserve Police Force *jawans* (soldiers) in a landmine blast in the Mausaurhi sub-division of rural Patna in 1999. Moreover, it has been said that he has admitted to the killing of a deputy superintendent of police and five policemen at Dhanarua in 2001, besides blasting the Nadaul railway station and looting seventeen rifles after killing a *hawaldar* (constable) of Bara police picket under Naubatpur police station. He is also believed to be one of the Maoists behind the audacious Jehanabad jailbreak of November 13, 2005, that resulted in

the escape of over 200 Maoists who had been incarcerated in the Jehanabad sub-jail.

In sharp contrast to her husband, the very sight of arms and ammunition was disturbing to Prabhavati. She stated in quiet tones, "I am contributing to the uplift of society too, but mine is a peaceful way. Of course, if someone tries to violate my rights, I will raise my voice as I have always done. I am not someone to be cowed down."

Fondly called *Netayeenji* (woman leader), Prabhavati came across as a well-respected village member and she was much sought after when it came to naming newborn babies. "Our children go to her centre to take lessons. She loves them like her own," said Reema Devi, a resident of Bhitiyan village, who was not scared or intimidated in any way by the fact that Prabhavati was the wife of a Naxal leader on the run. Added another local woman, Manjhilal Thakur, "Children like to be around her. No one has any problem with her. In fact, we have great regard for her. We are not even scared of her husband."

A graduate of D.N. College, Masaurhi, Prabhavati was appointed *anganwadi sevika* in 1991 and worked hard as a teacher for over two decades to earn the gratitude and love of everyone in Bhitiyan. Initially, however, life for her and her children had not been so simple. The family came up against many a trial, social as well as financial. Her father-in-law, a head clerk with the Public Works Department, had tried to persuade her husband, a Physics graduate, to take up a job, but he refused. Although he tried working in a cooperative bank for seven months, dissatisfied, he soon traded in his status as a banker for that of a Maoist activist.

In his absence, Prabhavati raised her two sons and a daughter with the support of her in-laws. And her children followed in her footsteps. Her eldest son, Rakesh Ranjan, made teaching his profession and started a physics coaching centre in Patna, while daughter, Amrita, graduated from JD Women's College in Patna and got married. Her youngest son, Abhishek, studied engineering from the prestigious IIT Kanpur and set

up his own software company in Delhi. Eventually, both her sons married of their own choice and have settled down away from their hometown. While they tried to convince their mother to come and stay with them, Prabhavati opted to continue her work in the village and live off her meagre *anganwadi* wages and the additional income from her five *bighas* of land (one *bigha* equals 0.4 hectares).

Life may have dealt Prabhavati some harsh lessons, but she has no regrets. All she wanted to do was to serve her local people and to do so fearlessly. Summing up her general approach, she said, “If you are scared, people scare you. If you are not, they do not dare to.”

### **Mother Courage: Turning Grief Into a Search for Justice**

*Geeta Seshu*

Mumbai (Maharashtra): “I know that my son will not return but I want punishment for the culprits. I want justice from the government,” said Akhtar Hasan Wagle, in a quiet but firm voice, as she sat by a grilled window that overlooked the spot where the police had shot her son, Shahnawaz, in an alley near Dockyard Road in south-central Mumbai.

Shahawaz was only seventeen on January 10, 1993, when he was gunned down by the Byculla area police. He died a day later in hospital. But for the determination of his family not to remain mute and beaten, he would have been just another statistic of the second phase of violence that tore through Mumbai in 1992-93 in the wake of the demolition of the Babri Masjid.

Akhtar, in her early sixties, and her husband, Tahir, live with the slender hope that the overwhelming evidence before the authorities will awaken them into taking action. During a

visit to the couple's quiet home in 2009, Tahir had remarked brokenly, "Even the report of Justice B.N. Srikrishna, who was appointed by the Maharashtra government to investigate the riots, has termed the death of my son as 'cold-blooded murder' – para 5.58 of the Srikrishna Commission Report. Surely, someone will listen to us."

In contrast to her husband, Akhtar displayed a calm and stoic demeanour. After she lost her older daughter, Arifa, in a drowning accident in Ratnagiri a decade ago, this brave mother's life revolved around Yasmin, her other daughter, and their fight for justice for Shahnawaz.

For the nearly two decades since the death of her son, Akhtar and her family have continued to live in the same small corner room on the second floor of Mumbai's Pathan chawl. The same room that overlooks the alley where his body once lay. Each day, Akhtar relives those moments. "It happened just here," she said, her voice shaking. Then, controlling herself, she continued, "The police came house to house and pulled out all the men, young and old. They pulled Shahnawaz from my hands and took him away. Before anyone could say anything, they had shot him. My daughter saw them from a crack in the window. She ran downstairs to him but they hit her with rifle butts and drove her back upstairs."

The mother and sisters watched as the police placed the youth's body onto a vehicle and took it to the city's J.J. Hospital. Tahir, to his eternal regret, was in Ratnagiri at that point. The family had gone there to visit a *dargah* (shrine) at Vishalgadh, and his wife, son and daughters had chosen to return to Mumbai right after, despite reports of the breakout of violence. It was only after Tahir returned four days later that the family could claim the body of their son. "I'm told he survived for a day in the hospital but no one could go to him. The city was under curfew and the women of my family could not venture out. They did not even tell me that he had been shot, they just told me to come back," he recalled.

Despite the tragedy they are living through, the Wagles firmly believe that their son did not die at the hands of Hindu

groups or their Hindu neighbours, who lived in the adjoining Rustom Daruwala chawl. According to their painful reconstruction of the events of that fateful day, the police had acted on an anonymous complaint that bottles had been thrown by someone from Pathan chawl. "My son and his cousin, Arif, were daring and helpful boys. They braved the violence to get milk, bread and food for the women stuck in their homes. I guess this was why they were targeted," Tahir surmised. While the police even dragged an eighty-five-year-old blind man out during that raid, Arif managed to escape by hiding under a bed in his home, as the women of his family sat on the mattress, almost suffocating him in the process.

Shahnawaz couldn't save himself. This, despite the fact that his father was a well-known figure in the area, being very active in local social groups. In fact, Tahir was familiar to the local police as well. He owned a jeep that was, ironically, requisitioned by the police during the riots. "They came to our house and shouted to us to throw down the keys of the jeep. We told them it had no diesel but they said it didn't matter and took the vehicle," recalled Akhtar. The couple often wonders: perhaps, if the police had known that the boy they had shot was Tahir Wagle's son, they may have given him better medical help and he might have survived.

But violence, in its madness, picks its victims without any reason. The police that shot Shahnawaz reportedly boasted that beneath their uniform they were Shiv Sainiks to the core, owning up to their sympathy with the local political party.

The Wagle family, on its part, has determinedly sought to secure justice against police officers K.L. Bishnoi, then Deputy Commissioner of Police (DCP) of Zone III; Kishore Mankar, then Senior Inspector of Byculla police station; Ulhas Patankar, Senior Police Inspector; Wahule and Balme, Police Inspectors; and Ramdesai and Gorasawant, Police Sub-Inspectors. Their daughter, Yasmin, as an eyewitness, gave evidence before the Srikrishna Commission.

"We went for every hearing of the Commission. At first, Yasmin was very frightened, but I told her that whether she

was afraid or not, she must go and give evidence. We went before the Commission with great hope,” said Akhtar. Yasmin, older to Shahnawaz by only two years, was so shaken by his death that she didn’t want to appear for her Class 12 board examinations. But, once again, Akhtar recalled, wiping away her tears, “I told her: ‘Your life is before you. You must study further. He won’t return but you have to make your life’.”

Later, the Commission, in its recommendations, sought action against those who were attached to the Byculla police station, naming Patankar, Wahule and Ramdesai. The Commission’s report stated that their conduct during the riots was extremely communal, that they had refused to record complaints in which Hindus were the accused, and that they had harassed and ill-treated Muslims. It further noted that their conduct indicated an attempt to shield miscreants belonging to Shiv Sena (C.R.No.591 of 1992) and termed an “eyewash” the inquiry conducted by DCP Surinder Kumar into Shahnawaz’s death.

Together, Shahnawaz’s family has tried to pick up the pieces of their lives. Yasmin got married in 1996 and moved to the Middle East, but she is committed to coming back to give further evidence if required. Every festival, birth or death in their larger family, every report that a friend of Shahnawaz has got a job, got married or had a child, brings joy. But it brings sorrow, too, since it stirs the memory they carry of their son’s hopes and dreams. “He was such a smart boy, so good at studies. He was studying in Elphinstone College and wanted to join the shipping line like his father and grandfather. He loved playing cricket,” Akhtar whispered.

The Wagles tell whoever wishes to hear about their son’s death that their hope is that Shahnawaz will get justice. For them, forgetting is not an option. Yet, Akhtar was puzzled when asked whether she ever felt angry at the death of her son and at the way politicians of all stripes sometimes stoke the fires of communal hatred. Her reply had a directness that was all the more poignant: “Yes, the politicians are responsible for communal violence. It is all a game for them. But I don’t

get involved in politics. I only want justice for my son, that's all."

### **A House for Nasreen, Riot-Affected**

*Shobha S.V.*

Mumbai (Maharashtra): The riots that swept India's commercial capital, Mumbai, in 1992-93, had multi-dimensional impacts on the lives of their survivors. Some lost close family members and got caught up in an unending search for justice. Others lost family members as well as the property they owned, including their homes, and were left without a roof over their heads or a neighbourhood they could call their own.

Nasreen Bano, in her early forties, was a resident of a neighbourhood called Indira Nagar, which lay in the dense Mandala settlement of the Mumbai suburb of Mankhurd. During the riots, her family, along with several others, fled from home and took refuge in some cramped quarters in the heart of Mumbai's Byculla area, where the terrified residents formed themselves into squads to keep potential attackers out.

After the violence subsided, Nasreen's family moved in to an abandoned mill in the neighbourhood of Madanpura, some kilometres away, along with many other Muslim families similarly displaced. Later, in 1999, when life seemed to have settled down a bit, Nasreen and her husband, a tailor by profession, purchased a small plot of land for Rs 14,000 in their old neighbourhood of Indira Nagar from a local slumlord and built a small house on it. However, the respite proved to be short lived: a government-organised demolition drive in 2004 brought down what the state termed an illegal slum settlement.

Thereafter, Nasreen, along with her older family members

and her two sons and two daughters, was forced to live on the streets. Eventually they, and some other homeless neighbours, moved back to Indira Nagar and constructed a makeshift shack on the same spot where their home had once stood. But once again, tragedy struck in 2006 as a fire destroyed all of Indira Nagar. Most of the inhabitants of the slum worked in the informal sector and they lost all their belongings, as well as their small livelihood ventures.

This pattern of dispossession, caused by circumstances ranging from communal riots to slum fires, has been fairly typical of the evolution of Indian cities like Mumbai. Explained Amita Bhide, Associate Professor, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, who has worked on urban displacement issues in Mumbai, “Women are the ones usually at home when demolitions take place. They go through immense pressure owing to the fear and unpredictability of a demolition. Besides, the onus of proving that her family is in ‘legal’ residence (as per the state government norms, which keep changing from time to time) puts extreme pressure on them. The feeling of being powerless, without having the strength of education and contacts in the right places, can wreck anybody. This intense pressure, followed by the need to carry on with life, can be a very heavy burden.”

Interestingly, being witness to a series of unfortunate experiences that have each culminated in a state of homelessness, only sharpened Nasreen’s sense of herself as a citizen with rights and strengthened her resolve not to be a victim. In 2008, rallying along with several women of her neighbourhood, she confronted the government over its policies involving slum dwellers and asserted her right to housing in the city. They joined the *Ghar Bachao, Ghar Banao Andolan* (Save a Home, Build a Home Movement).

That year, under the banner of the Andolan, Nasreen and others submitted a housing project proposal to the state housing department and the Central Urban Poverty Alleviation Ministry, which administers the government’s Basic Service for Urban Poor scheme. For this rather unique proposal, the

Andolan had hired an architect to design building apartments on the fourteen-acre plot on which Indira Nagar stood, with a 269 square feet house for each family. The proposal also envisaged a school, a primary health care centre and a dispensary within the neighbourhood.

Said Nasreen, when we met her in 2009, “The government does not want *jhoadpattis* (shanties). So why don’t they give us the authority to build homes? Why is it handing over the land to wealthy builders and developers for a pittance? Why can’t they give the land to us? We have *mazdoors* (labourers) in our midst. All the government has to do is to give us the land and we will build our homes for ourselves. After all, we are the people who have built the houses in this city.”

*Andolan* members met frequently to discuss the progress of their demands and their problems. While the government and major civil society organisations termed such dwellings ‘encroachments’, Nasreen emphatically refuted the claim. “These areas were plain quicksand. There was nothing here. We spent our hard-earned money, brought mud, and dumped it here to make the surface strong enough to build on. After we have done all the hard work, the government now wants to reclaim the land. Where was the government all this time? We surely have rights to this land,” she said. She also pointed out that the people who lost their houses because of the demolition in Indira Nagar had valid voter ID cards.

The demands that Naseen and her friends were making were not without reason. After all, who doesn’t want to live in a proper neighbourhood? Of course, Indira Nagar was far from ideal. Despite paying close to Rs 1,000 per month for their rented shanty, families here were living without any water or sewage facilities and water-logging was a regular occurrence, especially during the rainy season. Moreover, during the monsoon, this area was a hotbed for epidemics. Nasreen acutally referred to the deluge that affected life in Mumbai in July 2005 as a “tsunami”.

Meanwhile, the local community, on its part, was trying hard to bring some semblance of stability to their turbulent,

unsettled lives. Upon touring the neighbourhood in 2009, we saw a functional *balwadi* (nursery for children) poignantly filled with sketches and paintings of homes drawn by the children, reflecting their innermost desires. A mosque in one corner of Indira Nagar was the lone testament to the fact that there had existed a vibrant community here before the riots and demolition.

In many ways, Nasreen's family was still reeling under the tragedy of the communal riots that had stuck the city two decades ago. "My family was reduced to nothing after those riots. I lost my father and sister and one of my brothers became mentally unstable," she recalled. The family was able to sustain itself largely on the earnings of a younger brother, an electrician. Nasreen's big worry was that her youngest sister, in her late twenties, had not been married. But they had no money to arrange a marriage for her.

Despite being a riot survivor, Nasreen was pragmatic enough to recognise that basic needs like housing know no communal divide. "Both Hindus and Muslims want their homes to be rebuilt and both communities are united on this," she pointed out.

She had made up her mind that despite what the future brings, she would not relinquish her right to a home in Indira Nagar at any cost. "Why should we leave? This is our neighbourhood. I refuse to go anywhere else," she stated, clinging to the hope that the housing proposal put forward by the *Ghar Bachao, Ghar Banao Andolan* would be seriously considered by those who wield the levers of power in the city.

Will Nasreen's demand for a foothold in Mumbai be recognised? Only the future will tell.

## Gujarat Riot Kids Come Home – In Faraway Delhi

*Sukhmani Singh*

Jamia Nagar (Delhi): Set against the grim statistics of the 2002 Gujarat pogrom, a saga of hope unspooled in the bylanes of Delhi's Muslim-dominated enclave of Jamia Nagar. Love and harmony was the predominant leitmotif in a nondescript three-storeyed building here, home to twenty-two slum children from Gujarat. For these children, aged six to seventeen, their ebullient warden, Asma Khan, 48, was mother, mentor and guide, someone who was determined to prove that "there is nothing greater than the power of love".

Established in 2002 by a Muslim charitable organisation – the Zakat Foundation – to accommodate twenty-seven children who had been rescued from camps for riot-affected communities – twenty-two of whom were from Gujarat – it later became the home of an equal number of children from the shanty towns of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

For Asma, who left a comfortable job as principal of an east Delhi school to work for these children seven days a week, caring became an all-consuming passion. Virtually nothing deterred her – neither the over one-hour-long commute from home, leaving behind her own three children, nor the diverse challenges she tackled in a day's work. The lack of proper facilities was compensated for by her dedication as a caregiver. "Children have two sides to them, they can be moulded to become either good or bad. I have attempted to transform them through love and the right values," she remarked when we met her in 2009.

The children followed a rigorous daily schedule. Enrolled in an English medium school in the vicinity, aptly called God's Grace, where donors paid 50 per cent of the fees, their evenings were meticulously divided into tuition time, an hour of religious instruction, and another to master the computer. Once a month a picnic was arranged as well.

As a smiling Asma bustled around, tasting the food, tidying the rooms, supervising homework, there were loud cries for “Asma aunty” coming from all corners of the building. There was a spat to be resolved, someone needed help with homework, another wanted a hand with a heavy bucket, while a third was just looking for a lap to cry on. As mother and peacemaker, she was near omnipresent.

Said Najma, 14, the eldest and brightest of three sisters brought here from a Gujarat relief camp in 2002, “Asma aunty has taught me what love is and how to solve the fights of the younger children with love. I have learnt to be firm in my beliefs, never to tell lies or harm anyone, always help others, be independent, and never lose sight of my goal.” Her goal, she said, was to teach science but her artistic talent had also blossomed, as evidenced by the pretty wall hangings she had made, innovatively crafted with empty egg trays and beads, which adorned the girls’ dormitory.

While at least one parent of most of the children from the Gujarat relief camps had survived the pogrom, almost all had remarried or lived in such acute poverty that they did not have the means or ability to bring up their children with any degree of comfort. During their annual visits back home every summer, the children felt forlorn and unwanted. With their parents hard pressed to give them a proper meal, they returned looking starved. As Najma tucked into her special Sunday lunch of *biryani* and stew, she shrugged and spoke of her recent visit home: “No one had the time for us back there and we felt lonely.” Other children added, “We didn’t feel happy when we went home. We missed Asma aunty very much.”

Asma’s love and dedication also transformed previously traumatised boys into forward looking and ambitious youngsters. Mohammed Farooq, 14, a wannabe cricketer, said, “When I first came here, I used to cry a lot. But Asma aunty solved all our problems. She treated us all equally and explained things to us.” Added Wasim Akram, 16, who dreamt of becoming a doctor, “I never want to return to Gujarat, I feel insecure there. Coming here, I have truly understood the

Qur'an. It teaches us to love everyone as our brothers. I don't know why Hindus and Muslims fight with each other." Nurtured in the peaceful environment of this home, where even toy pistols were taboo, most of these children had developed an overpowering desire to become successful and build schools and hospitals for Gujarat's poor.

But this journey from trauma to tranquillity was a long and arduous one. Asma recalled the hot summer day in 2002 when she first met the children, after officials of the Zakat Foundation arrived with them from Gujarat. "They were filthy, barefoot, some had defecated in their clothes, and they behaved like animals. The first thing the cook and I did was to scrub them down with a hose-pipe and shampoo," she recalled. Even though her husband was bedridden at that time and needed her attention, after meeting the kids Asma felt impelled to commit to making a difference to their lives. "As a devout Muslim, I feel that the most important thing in life is to help others. The children were in such a bad state I put aside my own needs for them," she said.

Mumtaz Najmi, joint secretary of the Zakat Foundation, was one of the team that had brought the children to Delhi. "It was completely spontaneous. We chose those in the worst condition, fearing they would become extremists if they stayed on. They were so starved they would leap onto the food in the crowded relief camps," she said.

During their first few weeks in the city, the children were housed in two rooms in Okhla, a locality neighbouring Jamia Nagar. Bedding was hastily rented from a tent house and food was brought in from a hotel. Communication was a major problem, as the children spoke only their native Gujarati, so special Hindi classes were arranged for them in a central Delhi school. From washing bottoms and drying tears to stitching frocks for the girls, Asma spared no effort to give the children a sense of belonging. Gradually, the situation stabilised. A dry fruit merchant from the Walled City in north Delhi lent them his home in Jamia to house the children and the Foundation later purchased it.

Asma recalled some of the worst moments from the past: “They would all gather together at dusk and start crying, as most of their homes had been burnt at night. One of them had stayed underwater all night to escape the rioters and suffered nightmares long after the incident. I would sit on the lawn with them till dawn, just hugging them.”

Many of the boys also expressed their trauma through aggression, beating each other up in mindless violence. But Asma doggedly talked to them with love and compassion. Gradually, the children imbibed her own philosophy, which she said she had gleaned from the Qur’an: “Only people who lack humanity can hurt each other. No religion teaches you to fight or do ill to others. The world will become perfect only if you change yourself from within. It is your deeds that make you great.”

Perhaps Asma was a product of her own experiences. Growing up in the north Indian city of Kanpur, she gave tuitions to pay for her graduation in Political Science, English and Urdu from Delhi’s Jamia Millia University. With a natural affinity for children, she worked as a nursery school teacher for two years before marriage. As the wife of a printing press proprietor in central Delhi’s Daryaganj, her initial years of marriage passed by in a blur of peace and love, until her husband developed acute diabetes and fell seriously ill.

During his prolonged illness, which led to his early demise, the press her husband ran had to be sold and Asma became the family breadwinner. Financial travails forced her to shift her children from private to government schools, but they continued to perform well. She was of the opinion that everything worked out for her because she had dedicated her time and energy towards nurturing the underprivileged. With a smile, Asma ended, “Ever since I took on their responsibility, my personal problems have ceased.”

## **There's No Stopping Bimala's School**

*Ratna Bharali Talukdar*

North Cachar Hills (Assam): When the Saron Lower Primary School in Saron village, Assam, was burnt down by extremists in an ethnic clash in 2003, Bimala Hmar, an assistant teacher there, took it upon herself to ensure that the education of the local children would not suffer at any cost.

Saron village, which is near Mahur, a small hill-station in North Cachar Hills district, was attacked by suspected militants of the Dima Haram Daogah, an extremist group representing the dominant Dimasa tribe. Those were the days when there was a raging conflict between the Dimasas and the Hmars, another tribal community of the area, and the ensuing violence had resulted in the widespread displacement of people from both communities, with many innocents being killed in the process.

Nearly two-thirds of the houses in Hmar-dominated Saron village were completely burnt down. The fire also consumed two lower primary schools and one high school. Everyone in the village had to take shelter in makeshift relief camps made of tarpaulin sheets and bamboo, located close to the Mahur police station and an army camp, about one kilometre away from their gutted homes.

Recalled Bimala, who was the vice president of the Mahur unit of the Hmar Women's Association, when we met her in 2009, "Militants and miscreants attacked our village twice in 2003. The first attack was on April 9 when forty-eight houses were burnt down. In June, they came again, this time with more sophisticated arms and ammunition, and attacked Jeheron, one of the Hmar villages. When the police and security forces rushed to the spot, another group of miscreants entered our Saron village and set our homes and educational institutions on fire. The attack was so sudden and well-planned that we could not save anything."

Fortunately, Bimala's home, located in the third block of the village, escaped the devastating fire. So while others in the community were preoccupied with rebuilding their homes, Bimala concentrated on finding a way to ensure that the children of Saron would continue to get uninterrupted education. That was when she decided to run the school from her home. First, she discussed the idea with her husband, J. Malsown, who was working as a demonstrator at the local Department of Sericulture. He readily agreed to go along with her plan.

But it was a task easier said than done. Not only was their house too small to accommodate all the displaced schoolchildren, they also had no suitable school furniture. So Bimala decided to use her front yard and even converted a portion of the kitchen into a classroom for pre-primary children. "Textbooks and other study material too had got destroyed. But we were determined to conduct classes and even hold examinations on schedule. As it turned out, although the children had to face displacement and hunger, they did not lose their academic year," smiled Bimala.

In time, the villagers realised that Bimala had not just restored education amidst violence, she had initiated a process of rebuilding life amidst great devastation. Thanzual Khojor, a resident of Saron, put it this way: "Life was at its most hostile in relief camps. We had to spend days in acute hunger and penury and were afraid to return to our homes for fear of being attacked again. We were also extremely worried about the future of our children, their education and health. But we noticed that whenever they came back from Bimala Hmar's school, they had smiles on their faces. We then realised that we should not waste any more time fearing about the future but concentrate on trying to restore normalcy and peace by assisting Bimala and replicating her work."

In some of the most severely conflict-hit areas in Assam, including the Kokrajhar and Karbi Anglong districts, hundreds of thousands have been displaced and children have lost many years of schooling. In Kokrajhar district, for instance, some

3,14,000 people were displaced and had to live in relief camps for decades after a series of clashes between the Bodos and other tribal groups in the region in 1993, 1996 and 1998. Schooling in these relief camps began only in 1999 and that too at the government's initiative.

Bimala's makeshift school has been the only example of school education having been resumed immediately after a conflict situation in the state. What was even more noteworthy was that it was achieved at the initiative of a tribal woman. It actually encouraged Saron villagers to leave the relief camp as soon as they could and return home. Residents also collectively approached the administration and the Department of Education for rehabilitation as well as for the release of a grant to construct a school building. This community initiative worked out well and they were able to secure a financial grant of Rs 1,79,000 for a school in 2006.

As Bimala said, "The pain and agony of being displaced and losing our near and dear ones will haunt us forever. But by rebuilding our lives and by giving priority to education, we have been able to prove our resilience in the face of aggression and violence."

Her words were echoed by her students. Zonunthari Lungtau, who was in Class III at that time and then went onto study at the Presbyterian High School, the lone high school in the village, pointed out that it was Bimala who had taught her how to concentrate on studies, even in difficult situations. "Had she not guided us properly when we were in the relief camps, we would not have been able to continue our studies. I hope to become a doctor when I grow up," said the young girl.

Being a teacher and a woman of a minor hill tribe, Bimala made every effort to convey to the extremists that both the Hmars and Dimasas needed education and development, not conflict. That's because being one of four children of a village widow had taught her many lessons in life. "I had a tough life as a child. Even to buy books I had to work hard. After my matriculation, I could not go for higher studies despite my

desire to do so, and managed to get the job of an assistant teacher. During the riots, I was a mute witness to the burning of our school, but I was determined to keep the dream of education alive in my students,” stated this simple village woman endowed with both vision and courage.

### **Fighting for Prisoners’ Rights, Clad In a Burqa**

*Arfa Khanum Sherwani*

Hyderabad (Andhra Pradesh): The capital of Andhra Pradesh, Hyderabad, is known as a city of former nizams, historical monuments, centres of learning like the Osmania University, institutions of cyber technology – and for the infamous Mecca Masjid blasts of May 2007. These blasts, that took place in a seventeenth century mosque, shattered the peace for which the city was renowned. Nine people were killed immediately, and many more died later. They were to be followed a few months later by blasts at the Gokul Chat Bhandar and Lumbini Park.

Soon after the blasts, dozens of young men in the city were picked up by the police and charged for waging a war against the country. While the accused were in jails and their cases were being heard in courts, their families went through a harrowing time. Despite not being involved in any way with the blasts, they were ‘tainted’ by their relationship with the accused. Several of them, including elderly parents and young children, faced social boycott, were thrown out of rented accommodation, and forced into a penurious existence. Even those inclined to help them stayed away for fear of a police backlash.

That was when Dr. Rafat Seema, 42, a teacher by profession with a doctoral degree, felt she had to step in to help the women in these families. She met with a lot of resistance

initially and people advised her against involving herself in an issue that was so controversial. But Seema was determined to push ahead.

In 2008, along with Kaneez Fathima, a librarian by profession and a human rights activist, she set up the NISA Research and Resource Centre for Women. Although several women from almost all the corners of Hyderabad and all walks of life came forward to support NISA's bid to help the affected families, the task at hand was not an easy one. It was not like doing charitable work to help the destitute. Most of the accused came from poor and marginalised families, with little economic or social clout. As for the women – wives, mothers, sisters – for the most part they were poorly educated with few skills even to make a living. The little assistance that did come their way was clearly inadequate. The situation demanded not just the rehabilitation of these families with some temporary financial help, but a long-term training programme that would give them the ability to actually earn an income in the absence of the family's breadwinners.

According to Seema, it was a complex situation – one that demanded a lot of time and commitment from everyone involved. Funds came in the form of individual contributions, while the work was done by volunteers - from PhD students at Osmania University to sympathetic housewives from local neighbourhoods. "We began by giving the affected women some money to buy sewing machines or open a shop or boutique. Setting up small enterprises and running them required training. Those who were educated were given jobs as teachers, tutors or social workers," said Seema, the general secretary of NISA, when we spoke to her in 2011.

Meanwhile, the imprisoned men faced long-drawn, tough legal battles. And every day they spent away from home meant no income for their families. Recalled one of these men, who was later acquitted by the courts, "My world was completely devastated. Even my good friends were reluctant to talk to me. It was in such a situation that NISA extended a helping hand. If NISA hadn't been there as a source of support when I

was in jail and after I was freed, I don't know what I would have done. I don't know what would have happened to my family. I owe a lot to this organisation." He added, "I only had to go to jail but it was my family which was really punished. They were alienated from the rest of the world. Only Seema *baaji* (elder sister) would go to my house and talk to the women, consoling them and helping them whenever possible."

Another young man, who was freed in 2008, was able to complete the final year of his bachelor's degree in Unani medicine and surgery with NISA's support. He now runs a clinic as a qualified medical practitioner. When we talked to him, he also revealed that it was Seema who helped him find his life partner. "No one wanted to marry a 'terrorist' like me, even though I had been proven innocent. Seema stepped in and helped me find a bride."

Seema added, "There is an entire life left to live. More than anything, what these unfortunate men need is human support and the assurance that they have people by their side."

Despite the hostile environment and repeated visits to the police station to face repetitive interrogation, the gutsy activist – who prefers to remain covered in a burqa from head to toe – remained undeterred. She knew that just showing sympathy for those jailed for terrorism could invite the charge that she was 'anti-national'. So how did she muster the courage to come out publicly in support of the prisoners? After all, NISA's initiative was the first of its kind in Hyderabad and there was really no way of checking on the innocence of the accused before the trial had run its course. Seema remembered the conundrum NISA faced: "Yes, there could have been a possible error in judgement. Just their arrests had made these men and, by association, their families 'traitors' in the eyes of the Hyderabadis. We did initially face a lot of roadblocks. The police would come and ask questions of us. I felt resilient because I knew instinctively that I was on the right path. In any case, I also knew that if they were, by any chance, convicted, even criminals and terrorists have some basic rights and those rights had to be protected in a democracy."

She also pointed out how the fundamental rights of women and children related to these men were violated during those days, “What was their crime? Can you imagine the suffering of the relatives of innocent men, wrongly picked up by the police? Nobody is even prepared to listen to their side of the story!”

By 2011, many of those accused in the Mecca Masjid blasts had been pronounced innocent by the courts and their long months of suffering came to an end. Although it is impossible to make up for that lost time, life beckons them today, urging them to go ahead and achieve their full potential.

Observed Seema, “Their return to the mainstream is not a matter of a day or two; it is a process. It will take time. The best we can do for them in order to rehabilitate them fully is to trust them.” Which is what she had done. In the process she has also reminded the country that every human being has the right to dignity and justice.

## **In Gadchiroli’s Zone of Fear, A Doctor Saves Lives**

*Shoma Sen*

Gadchiroli (Maharashtra): Deep in the forests of Gadchiroli, a tribal district in eastern Maharashtra, live the Gond *adivasis* (tribals), among the poorest and most neglected people of the state. The region is considered dangerous because large parts of it have come under the sway of Maoist groups. The ensuing conflict between the militants and the State has turned the region into a zone of fear.

The forest is usually not a place where one would expect to find qualified doctors, especially ones who have studied at the worldrenowned Johns Hopkins University in the U.S. But then Dr. Rani Bang and her husband, Dr. Abhay Bang, who are both in their fifties and founders of the Society for

Education, Action and Research in Community Health (SEARCH), are not 'usual'.

Rani Bang (née Chari), the daughter of a doctor and granddaughter of a prominent Congress party member of parliament from Maharashtra's Chandrapur district, met Abhay, the son of the famous Gandhian, Thakurdas Bang of Wardha, at Nagpur's Government Medical College, where they were both studying. Abhay was also involved in the Sampoorna Kranti (Complete Revolution) movement initiated by political leader Jayaprakash Narayan. After marriage, the couple went to Johns Hopkins to pursue higher studies. On their return, both Rani and Abhay, determined to take the road less travelled, resolved to put their powers of healing – as a gynaecologist and physician, respectively – in the service of government Primary Health Centres for the benefit of ordinary people.

In 1985, the couple set up SEARCH, a multipurpose village within a village. Located in Shodhgram, about fifteen kilometres from the district headquarters of Gadchiroli on the Dhanora road, SEARCH is a hospital, a de-addiction centre, and a voluntary organisation that runs various projects on tribal welfare, health, adolescent sex education, and so on. It is also a research institute that has brought out many publications. Reminiscent of a tribal village, it is equipped with all the modern amenities necessary to meet its objectives. Mud houses amidst trees built around a common courtyard, hutments for in-house patients to live in with their families, a temple dedicated to Danteswari Devi, worshipped by the Gonds, and other symbols of tribal culture abound to make patients feel at home. "We asked the people what kind of a hospital they would like and then designed this facility," remarked Dr. Rani Bang, when we met her in 2009.

One of the greatest achievements of the SEARCH project has been to bring about a fall in the maternal mortality rate of the area through improved neonatal care. This has been done by introducing modern medicine and practices of hygiene into the tribal lifestyle, through camps, visits to villages, training

of birth attendants and health workers from among the community, and by encouraging city-trained doctors to work in the area.

According to Sunanda, Women's Health Coordinator, SEARCH, maternal mortality has always been high in this region because childbirth is carried out at home in the most primitive way. "Earlier, women used to arrive at the hospital only in cases of an emergency, due to factors such as lack of transport, finances, and also a lack of faith in modern medicine. But this has changed gradually." This positive behavioural change – including a growing preference for institutional deliveries – is largely because workers of SEARCH have taken pains to explain danger signs that pregnant women must watch out for so that they know when they must go to a hospital. "We explain about the anatomy, nutritious food, and convince the mothers-in-law to feed their daughters-in-law well," elaborated Sunanda, who has been associated with the project for fifteen years. Sunanda, originally from Nagpur, has done her masters in Sociology. She and her husband are both social workers employed by SEARCH.

Local customs are the reason for infant deaths, too. Traditionally, Gond mothers starve themselves for an easier birth, do not nurse for three days after their babies are born, and do not clothe the newborn for five weeks. As a result, pneumonia kills a large number of infants. In an attempt to address this concern, SEARCH has been encouraging mothers to check the weight of their newborns, among other measures. It has also trained Traditional Birth Attendants, who could be any committed person who has attended to around four childbirths in the village.

Another SEARCH intervention has been in improving the condition of the traditional Gond *korma*: – the rather dark and dirty hut in which women are isolated during menstruation. While it has been difficult to convince the community to do away with this practice of isolation altogether, SEARCH health workers have managed at least to improve the *korma*, turning it into a clean and comfortable place, with perhaps a bed and

a tiled roof. The *korma* has, in fact, been transformed into a 'women's room', where they meet during their difficult days, rest and share experiences.

Elucidating the SEARCH approach to improving the well-being of the Gonds, Sunanda spoke of the need to understand the essentials of Gond culture and build on their tribal heritage. "We don't laugh at the tribals, their beliefs or superstitions," she said, adding, "Their medicine is mainly herbal medicine and black magic practised by traditional healers. We tell the people that they should also take our modern medicine. We encourage them to bring their healer along and try to train him in modern medicine. Now the traditional healers trained by us carry malaria slides and give tablets."

At the other end of the spectrum, Dr. Rani Bang has been working on Gond tribal medicines, conducting scientific experiments to ascertain their veracity. She has argued that the use of asafoetida to treat fungal infections of the skin, garlic for vaginal infections, and boiled guava leaves for anal fissures probably does have a sound scientific basis. Her book, *Goin*, a Gondi word for 'friend', includes a study of the area's flora as seen through the eyes of Gond women and traditional healers. Her research has introduced her to a wealth of tribal knowledge and anecdotes. Yet, despite her wide exposure to tribal customs, there are times when she is left startled. Once, she was taken aback when a woman casually pointed to a plant, which she claimed was useful to "kill a husband"!

But how can people work so selflessly in an area of conflict? Don't Rani Bang and her colleagues sometimes feel intimidated by their difficult circumstances? Said Rani, the recipient of the National Award for Women's Development through Application of Science and Technology, 2008, as well as many other national and international awards, "What is there to fear? After all, everybody has to die some day."

## A Sri Lankan Tamil Refugee Builds New Worlds

*Papri Sri Raman*

Chennai (Tamil Nadu): V. Thenmozhi, in her late thirties, would have liked to have a life of her own – set up a home, build a career, become a mother perhaps. Yet, all her plans have been on hold for some time. “It is true that everyone wants to settle down, but for the moment my life revolves around the refugees from my country,” she told us in 2009.

Thenmozhi wasn’t exaggerating when she said that her life was dedicated to Sri Lankan Tamil refugees. This activist and counsellor has spent nearly two decades working with those who fled in thousands across the Palk Strait to the Indian mainland, after the Sinhala-Tamil ethnic conflict broke out in the island nation in the early Eighties.

In 1990, Thenmozhi, then only a teenager, had to leave her village of Velanai in Jaffna district of Sri Lanka, with her parents and a four-year-old sibling. Their destination was Madras (now renamed Chennai), the capital of the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu, where her elder brother and sister were already studying. Hers was a family of modest means and so they decided to reach Tamil Nadu on boat. That maiden voyage over choppy seas forced the young girl to reflect on her identity as an individual. “That dangerous trip made me wonder about who I was; about what the words ‘my country’ and ‘my people’ actually mean,” she recalled. She had grown up hearing these words but had not really thought about what they actually signified. It was only the experience of being a refugee that made her realise their true meaning. Said Thenmozhi, “I kept thinking about my village, my land, and the friends I had left behind. I thought about all my people who were fleeing from their own country, day after day.”

The Madras of those days was crowded with Tamil refugees. The Organisation for Eelam Refugees Rehabilitation (OfERR), set up in 1983, lent her family a helping hand in settling

down. "I was brought to the OfERR office. Everyone who worked for rehabilitation here was a refugee and instantly I felt I was among my people," she said.

Thenmozhi, who had just completed Class X, went on to join a city college, but the unsettled conditions made it impossible for her to concentrate on her studies. Her father fell ill at that point – the experience of abandoning his homeland had been hard on him. There was also very little money in the family. All these factors made Thenmozhi decide to give up college and work for OfERR instead.

For the young Thenmozhi, the decision to work with OfERR was not just about taking up any job. How was an eighteen-year-old to counsel an eighty-year-old refugee? How was a young girl to advise a mother who has lost all her children while attempting to flee her village in a leaking boat? What Thenmozhi realised immediately was that she needed to be better equipped to understand people's tragedies and clear their apprehensions.

So she went through the leadership training programme that is compulsory for every counsellor and community worker at OfERR. Elaborating on this training, OfERR chief, S.C. Chandrahasan, explained, "Here they are taught how to be different from all the other refugees, how to think positive, how to look at ways to move on in life. A refugee's life is always in danger of stagnating."

By 1994, Thenmozhi had become a full-fledged counsellor. As part of her work, she had to go from camp to camp – there were 117 camps in Tamil Nadu – talking to angry destitute men, disconsolate women and confused children who did not understand what had happened to them. "I had to first make friends with every group I met and then gain their confidence. This does not happen with just one meeting. So I had to go back again and again. Slowly, each one came out with his or her story. Their stories were all of loss and devastation," she said.

As she put it, over the next five years the young woman learnt to be the tree that gave the refugees from Sri Lanka

some shade, so that they could regain their strength and confidence to begin their lives anew. She also learnt typing and record-keeping, besides getting acquainted with issues like women's empowerment, gender equality and family violence.

By 2006, Thenmozhi had also acquired a diploma in Social Service Management from Chennai's Loyola College. Not only did she gain new knowledge as she went along, she also shared it with others in the camps. She talked to them about how to initiate income-generating activities, like setting up small shops, tailoring clothes, making baskets and selling vegetables and fish.

In the course of these meetings and conversations, many heart-rending experiences came to be etched on her mind. She remembered, for instance, a very shy mother of three, who she met at the Toppukkollai camp in Pudukottai district in 1993-94. The woman had become a recluse: she had refused to speak to anyone in the camp for months and wouldn't even come out of her hut. It was to reach out to such women that OfERR then decided to set up the Mother's Sangam, an organisation of mothers that functioned within the refugee camps throughout the 1990s. Eventually, that reclusive woman who spoke to no one started going out of her home and, later, counselling others.

For Thenmozhi, the most satisfying part of her work lay in empowering women. Chandrahasan understood why this was the case. As he said, "For generations, women in this region have suffered a lot of injustice. The time has come to right the wrongs done to them. We, therefore, focus on women as builders of a new and aspiring generation. Our women refugees, their daughters and granddaughters – now there are three generations of Lankan Tamil women in Tamil Nadu – are our assets, our best human capital."

As elsewhere in the region, even among Lankan Tamils, traditionally it was the husband who went out to work. Becoming refugees meant that familiar patterns of life were altered completely. Explained Thenmozhi, "Women in the

camps had to be a part of the income-generating process. But this was not an easy task. We had to teach them to assert themselves step by step: 'First, send your children to school. Start working. Learn to do small businesses. Join self help groups. Set up small shops. Start vending something.' That's what we told them."

Her decades-long struggle has had its share of small satisfactions. She has witnessed love bloom and relationships develop in these camps. Once, a young refugee woman in the Thiruvathavur camp fell in love with a man, a painter, from outside the camp. They were soon married. One day, while working, the husband fell from a high platform and broke his back. He was disabled and lost his job. "We taught that woman to make garlands out of flowers. She began selling garlands in the camp itself [Tamil women generally wear jasmine flowers in their hair every day]. Soon, she taught her husband the work and he started making garlands while she sold them and they made a good living out of this activity," the veteran counsellor recalled with pride and affection writ large on her face.

Thenmozhi's stories span across 117 camps. It is a lifetime of work. She has also made sure that younger women have been trained to become inheritors of this struggle for empowerment. "So much blood has been shed because of this conflict, so much tragedy and repression has occurred. But we still have a collective dream of going home one day. If I have accomplished anything, it is to help create the feeling in our community that we have the strength to rise up from the ashes and take charge of our lives once again."

## **Kavita Karkare's Courage Quotient**

*Geeta Seshu*

Mumbai (Maharashtra): The digital photo frame unit sat oddly

on a mantelpiece stacked with medals and citations, including an Ashok Chakra awarded posthumously to Hemant Karkare in the wake of the November 26, 2008 attacks in Mumbai.

Full of photographs of the Anti Terrorist Squad (ATS) chief in better times, lovingly chosen by his daughter, and set to his favourite Hindi film songs, the photo display vainly tried to drown out what became one of the many defining images of that Wednesday night: of the ATS chief donning a bullet-proof jacket and helmet, only to be shot dead later.

After receiving news that Mumbai was under a coordinated shooting and bomb attack by terrorists, later identified as having originated from Pakistan and arrived via sea, the ATS chief rushed to his official vehicle and was proceeding along Mumbai's Rang Bhavan Road with Additional Commissioner Ashok Kamte, Senior Inspector Vijay Salaskar and four constables, when the police party was fired upon by two of the attackers. Only one constable, Arun Jadhav, survived.

Along with scores of others who were glued to their television screens that night, Kavita Karkare also saw that last visual of her husband. Only a few hours earlier he had been eating dinner with his family at home.

Recalled Kavita, when we met her in 2009, a few months after those cataclysmic events, "Arun Jadhav came to meet me afterwards. He was very shattered. He told me how it had happened. But it took me at least two to three months before I could muster up the courage to visit the site of my husband's assassination near Cama Hospital. I wanted to see how it had happened and where; my sister-in-law was with me and we tried to picture it together."

For her as well as for the other victims, the disconnect between the reality of their own shock, confusion and grief and the events being played out on TV screens almost in real time, was nearly impossible to come to terms with. Yet, barely a month after the death of her husband, Kavita had resumed duty as a lecturer in Educational Sociology in a Mumbai college, in order to finish the syllabus set for the students as well as to prepare them for their forthcoming examinations. "I don't

know how I did it, but I had to go back and finish my work,” she recalled in a matter-of-fact tone that belied the effort it must have taken her. Grateful that her students had respected her privacy and refrained from referring to her husband’s, she was pragmatic about the civil society response. She observed that many organisations had, in the aftermath of November 26, held meetings on the concerns the attack had raised, but while some were genuine, others were merely interested in projecting their own agendas.

Kavita believed her husband had made the ultimate sacrifice for his country. As she said it, “He was that kind of person. One doesn’t become a martyr suddenly; values of patriotism cannot be imbibed instantly. It was part of his childhood and growing up years. His parents played an important part in shaping his value system.”

Hemant Karkare’s father, Kamlakar Karkare, was a well-known communist in Nagpur, while his mother came from a family close to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. Despite this marriage of people from opposing ideologies, the relationship was free of conflict. Karkare’s parents, in fact, encouraged independent thinking and the roots of liberalism ran deep. Karkare’s mother completed her education after her marriage and even Kavita was encouraged to take up a job and complete a bachelor’s degree in education after she had married Hemant. “I worked in a bank earlier but since I always loved teaching, I fulfilled my dream of doing a Master’s in Education as well. But I believe we need a revolution in the educational field too. As teachers, we need to discuss and debate contentious issues with our students so that they can contribute to building a more aware society,” she said.

For Kavita, November 26, 2008, was a defining day. She could not keep the disappointment from creeping into her voice when she said, “Some officers and politicians measured up, others didn’t. Today’s politicians fall short in their sense of patriotism. Where are people like Bhagat Singh in the country today?” Despite her calm and reflective demeanour, Kavita was bitter about the fact that officers like her husband

had been sent into the field with little information, no reinforcements and, significantly, with poor equipment. "I am angry. This system has to be changed from within. There must be more transparency, politicians must be made accountable. If they do not perform, they must be removed," she declared.

In its report, the Pradhan Committee, appointed by the Maharashtra government to enquire into the incidents of November 26, virtually exonerated the police establishment. But this was at variance with the accounts that Kavita and Vinita Kamte, wife of Ashok Kamte, who was also killed that night, managed to piece together. And although Kavita has never hesitated to publicly voice her criticism of the way the attack on Mumbai was handled, she has little hope of ever being heard by the decision-makers or getting any real justice for her husband and his colleagues.

Sitting in the living room of the official quarters she had permission to reside in for three more years, Kavita pointed to the driftwood lampshades, a wall clock and a coffee table: all designed by her husband during his stint as Superintendent of Police in the Maoist-prone areas of Chandrapur district in eastern Maharashtra, a situation he had tried to read about and understand. The rest of the house was also full of souvenirs and mementos. Kavita recalled how her husband took a personal interest in home décor, re-arranging the furniture and artefacts every fortnight. She also talked about his other interests which ranged from listening to old Hindi film songs and Marathi *abhangs* (devotional songs), to reading books, especially those on philosophy and science. Her grief, as she remembered the good times spent with her husband, was writ large on her face.

While the events of the night attack that shook Mumbai may have begun to fade from public memory over time, its victims are still haunted by their trauma and loss. Kavita's two children, a son and a daughter, have been her biggest support post-November 26, but she admitted that the family often felt isolated and that Hemant's assassination had created a permanent vacuum in their lives. Kavita pointed out that all

those who had been affected by that attack were in need of assistance in some form or other, and that monetary compensation alone was simply not enough. She made it a point to keep meeting the families of the other victims informally and talking to them. “They need help at every stage in their lives and there is no infrastructure or a social support system for them,” she observed.

“Everyone says women are more courageous than men, but that is simply not true, going by my case. It’s just perhaps that women are better survivors. Now I believe it is the responsibility of India’s citizens to come forward and ask the important questions about November 26, 2008,” concluded this woman, who has come to embody courage in situations of conflict for many in India.