

SNL 39

DECEMBER 2019

Sunita Aralika



SOUND & PICTURE ARCHIVES
for
RESEARCH ON WOMEN

SPARROW
supplement



ARUNA BURTE IN CONVERSATION WITH SUNITA ARALIKAR

(SPARROW entered its **Silver Jubilee** year in December 2013. In order to celebrate this we had taken a few initiatives, one of which is to organise CONVERSATIONS WITH WOMEN FROM VARIOUS WALKS OF LIFE.)

Sunita was born in the village Tupadi in the Nilanga taluk in Maharashtra on 26th August 1956. She was born into a family of cobblers and was abandoned fifteen days after her birth when her mother passed away. Her maternal grandfather, Kundalikrao Mane, brought her up and she studied up to 11th Standard. As a young girl of sixteen she came to Latur to work as a trainee nurse at Vivekananda Hospital. She met Dilip Aralikar who was a social worker, during her work in the hospital. She chose him as her life-partner in 1971 although he was from another caste. Since the last forty years she has been active in politics and social service in Latur. She has been active doing developmental work involving rights and literacy. She takes special interest in dealing with women's issues and actively supports inter-caste marriages and helps others to fight social injustices like dowry, eve-teasing and casteism. She has worked in the Janata Party, Janata Dal and Congress Party. She has been a member of Nagar Parishad two times and a member of the Zilla Parishad two times. She is presently the Director of Maharashtra Housing Finance Corporation. She is also the president of the Mahila Congress in Latur.

Her political work has taken her to jail twice; once during the drought of 1972 and later during the Emergency. With her autobiography *Hirkanicha Birhad*, for which she has been much acclaimed, she has entered the literary field. The title of the autobiography is inspired by Hirkani who was a simple, brave milk seller at the fort of Chhatrapati Shivaji and who gained fame when she scaled down the steep mountain slope of Raigad to return to her crying child in the village below. Sunita feels that her struggles and the challenges she faced have been akin to the brave effort of Hirkani to scale down the mountain to reach her child. Her two sons have settled in the US as a software engineer and a doctor.

ARUNA BURTE IN CONVERSATION WITH SUNITA ARALIKAR OCTOBER 2014 , MUMBAI

Aruna Burte (AB): Namaskar. It is an occasion of great happiness for me that SPARROW, Mumbai, has given me an opportunity to talk to Sunita Aralika today. I sincerely thank the organisers and begin our conversation.

Sunita Aralika, it is said that every person is a walking novel. It holds the wisdom of experiences and.. it also contains the formula and awareness of how life is to be led and one gains the knowledge of it. Though we have read *Hirkaniche Birhad* (The House of Hirkani) in the year 2010, today, all of us are extremely eager to hear about this directly from you. Also, it so happens that when we are about five to six years old, we come to know the stories of our birth from all the people around us then. So each one of us has a tale to narrate. Can we start today with the story of your birth?

Sunita Aralika(SA):- To begin with, let me thank all my sisters, the office holders of this organisation who gave me the opportunity and a medium to present the story of my life and also gave me a chance to chat with all of you. I consider this as a wonderful opportunity for me today that a thread of love and warmth is being cultivated through the medium of this organisation and I consider this as a great and very positive development.

I spent my childhood in the most terrible circumstances. My mother passed away 16 days after giving birth to me. I was deprived of my mother's love on the 16th day of my life itself. This also created a frightening question mark in front of my relatives. They felt that they had cremated a grown, adult girl from their family just a day before and what could they do with a mass of flesh? This was the question

that haunted my mother's parents, that is, my maternal grandparents. My father was not willing to take me back home. He felt that had it been a son, he could have been of some use to him for continuing with his family line. But what could he possibly do with a daughter? What use could I possibly be for him? A daughter will neither continue with his family name nor would she be of any support in his old age. Then why should I take care of her, my father thought. He was not really in a condition to take me back with him, but finally he had to succumb to the pressure of the village and the relatives. He picked me up and carried me back home with him.

My maternal grandfather was in an uncertain frame of mind. But when my father took me away, he was frightened. He knew my father's nature. After witnessing the ugly arguments about looking after me in the house, my grandfather felt that instead of carrying me back home with him, he would dump me somewhere in between. Terrified of this possibility, my grandfather followed him quietly. His fear was proven true. My father dug a small pit near the spot where my mother was cremated, buried me alive in it and walked away (Sobs). While my grandfather was considering various terrifying possibilities, he saw my father running along the road. Now, if a person is carrying even a bag, he will not be able to run with his arms freely hanging by his side. My grandfather deduced that my father had thrown me away somewhere in the mountains or valley, somewhere in the thorny shrubs and bushes.

My grandfather set out to look for me. He looked for me everywhere but could not hear my cry anywhere. Then the poor old man went and sat at the place where his daughter was cremated the day before and wept as though his heart would break. He wailed and asked her to forgive him because he couldn't look after her child. Somehow he kept looking around and suddenly, he spotted a few tiny fingers protruding out of the earth. He was puzzled because he had not heard of any infant dying recently in the village. He crept towards the spot and started digging it and discovered me in a half dead condition.

The illustration in *Hirkaniche Birhad* with the hands (sobs) picking up the mass of flesh is that of my grandfather bringing me out of my grave.

The poverty was horrific. There was no food to eat and they just could not afford to take me to a hospital or a doctor. But they had to fight for my survival. My grandparents thought of a rather unusual way of keeping me alive. They lay me down with the newly born billy goats. For five days, they struggled to put life back into me with the warmth of the animal and feeding me milk with a cotton ball. This is how they brought me back to life and after that they never kept me apart from them. They lived under the terror that while they were away for work, my father might come and take me away. With this fear, they left the village. Till the time I was four or five years old, my grandfather never stayed for more than eight days in one place. He was a cobbler by profession, so he could easily earn his meals in any village by repairing broken footwear. For three years, my grandfather did not care about home, hearth, relations, happiness... nothing. He simply held me to his heart firmly and looked after me, after I turned around four, he settled down in a village.

AB- It is natural that you feel emotional while talking about all those painful moments. But despite such hardship, your grandfather called you 'Shivba' (Shivaji). That was rather unusual. It meant that in some way, you were getting something different from him. The conditions were tough, but you went to school. Tell us a little about your education and the upheavals that you faced during that time. You talked about your grandfather. Tell us a few things more about your childhood.

SA: During those days when my grandparents went out as laborours, they also had a daughter who was of my age. There was a difference of only 15 days between us. However, after my mother died, they never told anyone that I was their granddaughter. They always said that they had twin daughters. They raised us with this belief [that we were twins]. Finally, after

we settled down in a small village called Tukdi, we two sisters started going to school. We were not allowed entry in school because we were Dalits. Since we were Dalits, we could not enter the school, so we sat on the steps outside through rain, sun and winds. We never had our own slates and pencils. If anybody's slate broke, or if there was a piece of pencil lying somewhere in the garbage, or a tiny piece left over after the teachers used it and threw it away, we would use it. We studied on such a slate and with such pencils till we completed our Fourth Standard. I am proud to say that my grandfather's efforts bore fruits and I stood first in Mathematics in the Board exams of Fourth [Standard]. There was not a morsel of food to eat at home. No person to talk to, no clothes to wear and no sheets and beds. I never got a new frock in my life. But I studied extremely hard even under those circumstances. Till I was in Fourth [Standard], I would share any work that came my grandfather's way. I would throw myself into work. I would work extremely hard. At that time, my grandfather was very ill. He developed a severe back problem.

AB:- OK, so he had a problem with his back...

SA: My grandfather would come back home bent under the weight of wood. I would be waiting for him. As soon as I would see him, I would rush to lighten his load and take it over my little head. (Sobs). At that time, he would feel that I was not his daughter, but I was 'Shivba' and I would be as brave as Shivba. He firmly believed that his granddaughter would bring glory to his name. Since then, he started calling me Shivba with affection. Whenever I worked, he would admiringly say that his little one wasn't the kind who would sit back and wait for someone to feed her. He felt sure that I would make something of my life and would earn a living with dignity and self-respect.

AB: And somewhere I feel that he instilled that confidence in you while rearing you. Your entire family was working hard. You were especially aware of your grandfather's hardship and struggle and hence were closely bonded with him. You talked about your education till the Fourth Class

but then eventually, you had to leave your village Tukdi. Tell us something about your further education.

SA: In my village, the Zilla Parishad School was only up to the Fourth Standard. When it was time for me to go to Fifth Standard, my grandfather resolved to continue to send me to school. He made up his mind that he would starve himself further, be dressed in rags, but he would not pull me out of school. He had not studied at all. In fact, even from my father's side of the family, no one from several generations of his family had ever gone to school. I was the first girl who had studied up to Fourth Class. He started feeling that he ought to teach me further. For Fifth Class, I was admitted to Shyamveer Highschool in the neighbouring village of Shiwadi Kotar that had classes right up to Eleventh Standard. This was my father's village. We started going there daily. We travelled via Latur.

As I entered Fifth Standard, my expenses naturally increased. The size of my clothes increased, my appetite increased and all these issues became grave ones for my grandfather. He always felt bad that he could never give us fresh food. He worked very hard. On my part, tried to help him out by working in other people's homes on Saturdays and Sundays. I helped them out in clearing the weeds, bringing firewood, collecting cow dung, plucking beans and tamarind and such tasks. Whatever little money it fetched me, we would buy books for both of us. As far as clothes were concerned, we never got an opportunity to wear new clothes. We lived in old, torn clothes that people gave us. We made saris of two or three colours out of those and used them in school but we never felt bad about going in rags. We were only concerned about covering ourselves decently and we just made sure that we did not expose ourselves in any way; we never cared whether the dress we wore was old, torn, dirty or faded.

In between all this, someone instigated my father. People from the village told him that his daughter was getting educated and it meant that now her attitude

would change and she would become vindictive; 'She will take revenge on you,' they said, and brainwashed him. You tried to kill her so she will destroy you now. So unless you do something to curb this now itself, you and your entire family will not be saved from her wrath.

We travelled for our school from one village to the other in unimaginable hardship, through rain and blazing sun. We would have all loved to stay together, but the circumstances did not allow it. Every day, there were only two bhakris made; and the four of us would divide them into half and share. If the two of us had one full each, then my grandparents would go hungry. (Chokes with emotion)

AB: So, you stayed for a few days in a separate room.

SA: My grandfather managed to convince my father that people in the village criticised him daily because I had to go to school in such difficulties. So he asked my father to allow me to stay with him. He felt that I had suffered tremendous deprivation in his house and compared to that, my father's condition was slightly better. He felt that at least I could have a full meal under my father's roof. He asked me to stay with my father. Merely eight to ten days after I went there, my step-mother poisoned my bhakri. [Normally] she would never leave it for me. But one day, I went home in the recess and saw one full bhakri in the container. I was very happy that I was going to get one whole bhakri for myself. I took it, took water with it and went and sat in the terrace. When I broke a piece of it, it started shining unusually. My young mind did not understand much, but somehow I went and showed it to my father's aunt, my grandmother. I told her that the bhakri was shining and I wondered what kind of bhakri was being prepared in the house. She carried it upstairs and looked through it in bright sunlight. She asked me, "Child, did you have anything from this?" I said, "No." So she said, "Don't have this. This bhakri has been poisoned. Somebody has tried to kill you."

When my grandfather came to know about this, he took me back. He said, "Even if my child starves, it is

okay. I will hold her close to me and sleep on an empty stomach but I will not keep her with you. Let my baby be with me." I started the hard travelling once again. When I entered 11th Standard, we had to go for our exams. Two to three months before that, my father tried to murder my grandfather. He felt that if he managed to strike at the base of the tree and bring it down, how could the branch survive? If my grandfather died, it would be easy for him to get rid of me. But he was saved by the presence of mind of a goatherd woman. His nephew deceived him into accompanying him to remote forests and mountains. My grandfather trusted him. He believed that I was in some kind of danger and he followed his nephew into the jungles believing that his nephew was taking him to me. However, there was a woman in the jungles who alerted him to the danger and he escaped.

A couple of months after this incident, we had our 11th Standard Board exams and we had to go to another village. We were extremely poor. All the students carried their lunch with them and we had nothing. My grandfather wondered what he could arrange for us. He had worked in wheat and jowar fields and he asked the owners to give him a handful of grains for us in return. He told them that his children were going for exams and he needed it for us. He set about for the village Tukdi. On the way, there was a flour mill. My grandfather wanted to grind the flour and hand over our meagre meal to us.

In the meanwhile, we decided to leave for the exams. My grandfather was unwell and we did not wish to trouble him more. Between the two villages, there was a stream and a very deep valley. There stood some young men who had been hired by my father to kill us. One of them happened to be his own brother, my uncle, who had been married for four to five years. We were completely unaware of all this. The two of us plodded along, in the blazing heat of two o'clock in the afternoon. There was not a soul in sight.

As we climbed up through the ravine, my uncle who was hiding in the bushes, sprang out. He had a chopper in his hands, meant for cutting down

sugarcane. He was fully naked and had painted his whole body black. He rushed towards us in this appearance. We sensed some movement in the bushes and felt a presence. We were frightened and turned into the fields. My uncle started following us. The field was semi-ploughed and it was difficult for us to walk or run through it. In this condition, the two of us fled for our lives, with the murderer chasing us. My sister was trying to save me and I was trying to save my sister. She could not run fast and at one point, I felt that she had tripped and fallen into the field. I thought now my uncle was going to kill her so I screamed and asked her to run and get away from him. But the killer went close to her, peered at her face and moved away from her. Then he turned towards me and started chasing me. My sister, who was my aunt and my grandfather's daughter, yelled, "Shive, run for your life! He has come to kill you! He is none other than a murderer sent by your father! He is your enemy. Run fast! My father has raised you ever since you were a ball of flesh, he has looked after you by starving himself and is waiting for you to grow into something. Now, if you die, all his efforts will go waste, so please run and save yourself!" My sister kept screaming and I kept running till my lungs would burst.

The man was very close to me now. Had he hurled the chopper at me, he could have easily killed me. But I kept shouting, "Help me, help me!" As luck would have it, there was a goatherd who was grazing his cattle nearby. He heard me and rushed in the direction of the commotion. He saw the man chasing me and he aimed a hard kick at him in his back. My uncle fell flat on his face.

Thus my own father tried to end my life not just once, but thrice. But let us say that I have a strong lifeline and I am here today, talking to you, I was destined to meet you, so I came out of that situation also. (Weeps)

AB: You are right. When you were in high school, you met your Sir. Every cloud has a silver lining and your teacher was that lining in your difficult circumstances. He played a huge role in your life. You faced immense hardship but you continued

to learn handicrafts. You were skilled in making *gonde* (tassels). You were bright not just in your studies, but even in sports. I am surprised how you managed all this.

SA: Hmm, yes, right. Somehow it so happens that when a person is poor, he doesn't have any wealth or material possessions, he is gifted with enterprising spirit. I had learnt the lesson of working hard from my grandfather. He had taught me that it was okay to starve but it was not correct to cheat anybody. One was to have only what one earned through hard work. I learnt all this from him. You mentioned my teacher. He was a very good man. Had he not given me support and his parents given me a shelter, I would have never been able to complete my education till Eleventh Class.

My sister and I would shut the door of the class in the recess and study during that time. My teacher came to know through some other students that we did not have our food during the interval. One day, he kept a watch over us. We sat at the bench and studied during the recess. He knocked at the door. We opened it and saw him standing in front of the class. He asked us, "How come you are in the class and not gone for lunch?" We told him that we had our food and we had come there to rest. He scolded us for lying. We burst into tears and told him that we could get food only in the evenings. We did not have enough to eat during the day and bring it in our lunch box. He invited us home.

When we told our grandfather and Bai, my grandmother, about this, she said, okay, you carry to school what you have here in the evening. At nights, if there is any food left, you have it, or else, go to bed on an empty stomach. We tried it for some days, but it did not work. We continued to be hungry. My teacher could not bear to see our condition so he allowed us to stay with his parents in a small room. It was because of him that we started going for tuitions and extra classes.

AB: As you mentioned all your hardship and your teacher, somewhere you also mentioned the songs

of Bhulabai. You composed poems when you were in school and you also sang them. I feel that somewhere, that urge is still there inside you. Can you sing four lines of any song? (Laughs)

SA: (Starts laughing). It's difficult for me. I don't have a good voice.

AB: Still...

SA: I was very fond of all these things since childhood. In villages, we celebrated the festival of Pola where we worshipped the bullock and decorated him. I would do that. I made decorative hands of Goddess Mahalaxmi and various masks. Bhulabai is a favourite game played in our village where womenfolk of the village come together for two days and dance in circles holding hands. Of course, we would not be included. We sang well, we were very talented, but we were after all, Dalit girls. We were not allowed to join them. But we sat away from them and sang and the women danced to our songs. I would sing a lot, but now I don't remember all of it. I will sing what I remember. This is a typical rural song and maybe no one has even heard of it.

*Pandharichya vaatet khurpeet hote mee peek
Aiku aali poti deva Vitthala-chi
Pandharichya vaatet khurpeet hote shenga
Aiku aala kenga deva Vitthala-cha
Pandharichya vaatet khurpeet hote saal
Aiku aala taal deva Vitthala-cha
Deva Vitthala-cha*

*(On the road to Pandharpur, I was harvesting the crop
When I heard the call of Lord Vitthala
On the road to Pandharpur, I was plucking the beans
When I heard the music of Lord Vitthala
On the road to Pandharpur, I was cleaning the husk
When I heard the beats of Lord Vitthala
Of Lord Vitthala)*

AB: In connection with this, I would like to ask you about the discrimination based on caste practised in the villages even today. This is a bitter

reality even now. You faced this when you were young. You experienced this from your Seventh to Tenth Standard. Would you like to say something about this? You just mentioned that in Bhulabai, you stood away from others and sang. You couldn't fill water or you were not allowed to sit in the school. Can you elaborate on this further?

SA: Yes, we have faced a lot of humiliation and discrimination on the basis of our caste. We could draw water from the stream, but there was only one spot from where we could take it

AB: Meaning?

SA: It means, there was a fixed pattern where people stood and drew water. It was decided who would fill water from the topmost spot, who would be the second one and who would fill from the lowest point. The lowest place was given to the caste of Chambhars or the cobblers, who were comparatively closer to the [upper caste] Hindus. We were allowed to stand there; below us stood the Maang community and the lowest were the Mahars. It was like a hierarchical pyramid of castes. We had dug a little pit for ourselves with our hands for filling water. We would fill one pot and go and empty it out. By the time we came for a second one, somebody would have mischievously destroyed it

At that time, I was studying in school in Shivni and stayed in my teacher's house. There was a well. The entire village took water from there. I would carry my earthen pot there and keep it near the well. I would request the people drawing water from the well to pour remaining water in our pot. But men, women and children of our age would laugh and mock at us and pour the remaining water on their feet. The elders would tell us that they did not have time to fill up our pot and instead washed their feet with it and went away. For days together, my pot would remain dry.

AB: In Shivni?

SA: Yes, this happened in Shivni. Finally, we would beg

and plead with people that we had no water and requested them to give us some. We had to wait for several hours before we got a little water. We suffered all these humiliations because we were Dalits.

AB: I think the situation has changed somewhat today.

SA: No, I don't think so. I will tell you why after a while.

AB: Okay. You suffered a lot during your growing years—you faced hardship, insults and poverty. You grew up and completed your education up to Eleventh Standard. Then you got a job. You faced utter poverty and deprivation, but you continued to be firm in your ideals and goals. Your strength of purpose and determination did not waver even slightly. Your resilience amazes me. Can you talk about it?

SA: It was our poverty that taught us to work hard and earn our meals through our own efforts. Plus, it was my grandparents who created the ideals for us. They instilled in our hearts that whatever you earned, it had to be through your own hard work. This created that stubborn determination in me and it exists even now.

AB: Your determination persisted even after you turned into a full time political activist. This is a different kind of idealism. I see the entire credit going to your childhood and upbringing. That is the period when we are collecting influences and building our character. We get our strength from there.

SA: Let me tell you how it was. We had a childhood full of deprivation where we neither had enough food to eat, nor could we freely play to our hearts' content. Most of the times, hunger raged through our stomachs and we were forced to turn towards hard work. What happens is, normally people have some dreams about their future. Often they think of what they will do when they grow up, or maybe the next year, or when they wake up in the mornings, they think about it. But for

us, we had only one dream—on whose farm could we get work the next day? How much money would we get from it? And what could we possibly buy from it to eat? This was the only question that stood in front of us. So we had no dreams for our lives.

AB: Doing your matriculation...

SA: No, education was my priority. But I could not nurture any other dreams.

AB: Tell me about your further journey. After completing your education, you took up a job. Tell me about it. How did you find your life partner? Tell me about your marriage.

SA: I appeared for my Eleventh Standard exams and then I decided to do something more. I knew that had I continued staying in the village, I would not be able to do anything. It was essential for me to move to a bigger city. One of our acquaintances gave us the name of Vivekanand Hospital. I got a job there as a trainee nurse. After I worked there for a while, my grandmother and my aunt started harassing me a lot. Whatever I earned, I had to divide it into two parts and give it to the family. My aunt started feeling that she had the right to one full bhakri and if half of it went to me, then it made me her enemy. Our fights grew day by day. She started behaving very badly with me.

While I was working in Vivekanand, I met my future husband Dilip Aralikal. He worked as a technician there. He lived upstairs and we lived below. He would often question my sister and ask her why they tortured me. She would abuse him as well. She would tell him that if he felt so much sympathy for me, why didn't he keep me with him? But he had no such thought in his mind. Gradually, I started visiting him frequently. I confided in him, vented my unhappiness and consulted him when I was in difficulties. He told me that what was happening was wrong but that I will definitely find a way out of this. One day, I had gone to his place. He was away on his duty. I sat with his aunt and chatted about kitchen matters. His aunt

cooked for him and went away. I sat alone and waited for him. Just then, my aunt and my grandmother came there and started abusing him badly. But he was not there at all. My aunt said, 'If you want to live as his mistress, you may go and die there, but you must return all that my father has given to you.' I did not understand what she wanted. I had nothing, other than the clothes that I wore. She said, "My father has given you this sari, the blouse and the petticoat that you are wearing." She literally snatched the clothes off my back. I was left with not a stitch on my body. I grabbed a bed sheet on the bed in Dilip's house and covered myself in it. I locked the door and shut myself inside.

Dilip returned home at seven in the evening, but I did not open the door for him. He wondered what the matter was. I opened the window slightly and told him of my predicament. I said I couldn't possibly open the door for him in this condition. He asked me to wait for a while and left. He had never bought clothes even for his sister or mother. He went to a friend of his who had some experience in these matters. The friend took him to a readymade garments shop. Dilip bought a sari, blouse and petticoat for me. He threw the clothes inside from the window. I hastily got dressed and opened the door for him. He came inside and hugged me. From that moment, we came close to each other.

After a few days, he accepted me as his life partner. This brought about a huge change in him. My husband is sitting here with us. He is a Brahmin by caste and I come from the Charmakar community. In 1971, we got married according to the Arya Samaj tradition in Latur. When Dilip Aralikal came into my life, I was ecstatic. I felt that now the happy phase in my life was about to begin. I was deprived of love and affection since childhood and he showered me with it. But my happiness was short lived. We belonged to starkly different castes in hierarchy. The period of 1971 was dreadful. Dilip's family members opposed our marriage very strongly. They not only opposed me, but they also tried to kill me. At one point, they actually dragged me out of the house and took me to a place where I would be molested and then they would

challenge him whether he would marry a characterless woman like me. I faced extreme trauma and so did he. But my husband was a very firm man. His father advised him that they were Brahmins, high caste people and he was free to have as many mistresses as he wanted to. He could keep me as a mistress and then both the families could live together. But Dilip Aralikal battled all this opposition and stood by his decision to marry me as per the traditions and accept me as his legal wife. He made it very clear that he would not leave me. Because of his resolution and unwavering approach, we remain together even today.

AB: You also faced opposition from your grandparents. They also were not in favour of this relationship, right? But you were very clear at that time that you wanted him as your life partner. You seemed sure about him. At that time, I think you must have been barely 18 years old.

SA: 16-17 years old.

AB: So you were very young, then how were you so sure of your choice?

SA: When a person is very troubled by life, and he finds a small ray of hope, he holds on to it. It is like a drowning person clinging to even a small branch and trying to survive. I was getting a lot of emotional support from him. His comforting hand on my back was extremely reassuring. I knew that he would look after me well, take good care of me and we would together face whatever came to us in life. That was the only thought in my mind, nothing else. Because I was just too young then.

AB: You were really very young.

SA: I had hardly read anything till then. There was no wisdom to draw upon. I was simply a young Dalit girl from rural areas. That was the only way in which one could describe me.

AB: Hmm...But I think you had the wisdom of experience, though you do not agree to it. I feel

you had observed Dilip Aralikal very closely. (Laughs). You have mentioned this in your writings. You observed how he spoke and behaved with others so you could judge what he was as a human being. Additionally, Dilip Aralikal's entire life was associated with social organisations. This was something totally new for you. You say that you did not have a treasury of thoughts and ideas with you. But I believe that you had loads of sense that came from your life and experiences. You came in contact with a person who was very active in social organisations and youth related activities. A new world opened before you. After marriage, did your opinions and thoughts change naturally, or did you take a conscious decision to get involved with social issues?

SA: When I got married and we started living together, my husband would often explain many things to me. After my grandfather, there was nobody who had taken the efforts to sit with me patiently and explain things to me. Nobody had taught me to deal with challenges and how to overcome them. My husband was a very well-informed and a well-read man. He always urged me to pay attention to social issues and conditions. But I always ignored them. I had no interest in them. But then one incident happened that brought about a complete change in me. The ST Division movement took place in Latur. It turned violent and two to three students lost their lives in it. Many were critically injured and were admitted to Vivekanand Hospital where the two of us worked. When I saw the injured, I don't know what happened to me suddenly. But that was the day when I turned towards social issues. As I developed interest in these, my political teachers such as my own husband and Dr Kumar Saptarshi drew me into it.

AB: Right. But you did not just turn towards them. You threw yourself completely into these causes. Many different social movements and uprisings took place under your leadership. Tell us about your skills in handling social issues.

SA: When I started working in social movements, there were hardly any women in it. Besides, I was very young. But my guides and mentors were very thoughtful and foresighted. They guided me through all the steps and showed me the path to see issues through. So far, I have carried out at least fifteen to sixteen movements. I have spent at least one to two years of my life in the police station. I spent 11 months in jail during the Emergency. At that time, my younger son was three months old and the older was two and a half or three. My husband was there. We had lost everything. But while I was participating in these movements, I would like to tell you one thing...

AB: The fee hike...

SA: There was a very strong movement about renaming the Marathwada University as Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar University. I conducted the movement in the district of Latur with the help of my colleagues. We were successful after many days of struggle. After that, I initiated another movement for the rights of the Dalit people for education; I demanded that the amount of the scholarship has to be raised. This movement was conducted by the Yuva Kranti Dal under the guidance of Dr Kumar Saptarshi and my husband Dilip Aralikal. It was successful. After that, the most successful movement that we saw through was that of the SSC students in 1972-73. There was a severe drought in Maharashtra. It was impossible for the 12,000 students studying in SSC to appear for exams that year.

AB: The 1972 drought...

SA: It was a severe drought. What happened was, the parents started paying fees only for the boys so they could appear for the exams. After all, the sons were the light of their lives! A son would be the support in their old age, while a daughter belonged to some other family. So, naturally, they made her sit at home. Some girls came to me and told me that they could not appear for their exams. I started a movement in Latur. Under the guidance of Kumar Saptarshi, the movement caught on all over Maharashtra. We protested so

strongly for three months that finally, at the end of it, our demands were accepted. 12,000 girls in Maharashtra were able to appear for their SSC exams. Even now, sometimes when I go to Mantralaya or such places, I see some of my women students who come and specifically tell me that had I not fought for them then, probably they would not be holding the posts.

AB: The drought in Maharashtra in 1972, leading to girl students not being allowed to appear for SSC exams, and the resulting movement became a milestone in your work for Dalit women and women's education, especially those from the poor strata of the society.

SA: They were not Dalits, they were girls from higher castes.

AB: Yes, but they came from poor conditions.

SA: Yes, they were poor.

AB: They were unable to pay their fees, they were poor.

SA: Financially weak.

AB: Yes, economically backward. So you began your socialist and political journey. Though you were working as a trainee nurse, you stepped onto a political path. Then came your stint with Yukrand (Yuvak Kranti Dal) and Congress. You crossed these milestones also. Now, you also work in the newspaper. Tell us a little about this.

SA: I was carrying on all these movements with the help of my colleagues. People all over the district became familiar with my name. There was a feeling that this woman fights for the rights of the common person and she is a pillar of support for common people. She takes everybody along as she goes ahead. People developed a trust and faith that if they came to my house, I could definitely help them out. There was a sense of confidence in the common people, the Dalit peasants, labourers and the students. During that

period, in 1974, the Latur Municipality announced its elections. All of us who were like-minded socialists, sat together and discussed. This included Anna-- S M Joshi whom we used to call Anna--Mrinaltai, Pannalal Surana and Vaidya Sir [Shankar Vaidya]. Vaidya Sir passed away just sometime back . All of us came together. I was working for Yukrand and we decided that we will not participate in the elections. We will continue with our agitations on the streets, especially the students' movement. However, Kumar Saptarshi opined once that we may carry out the movements on the streets but we also need to know what happens within the four walls of power. Once we come to know that, on the basis of that, it will be much easier to continue the movement outside. Then, we will also be in a position to deliver justice to the common person. There were discussions on who would run for the elections and my name came up. Everybody felt that under those circumstances, only I had the chances of winning the elections. So, it was decided that I would be supported for my candidature.

The decision of my fighting the elections was final. Now, the next discussion was, through which political party would I stand? Which political symbol? Yuvak Kranti Dal was considered to be the baby of the Socialist Party. So, finally I stood for the elections through the Socialist Party. My colleagues supported me in full strength. They campaigned for me strongly by meeting different people. We had no resources for campaigning. Despite all this, I won the elections with an outstanding majority by defeating two other male candidates of the ruling party who lost their deposits. Thus, I entered the hall as a corporator at the age of 17.

AB: I think that you had exhibited the strength of your character by showing leadership qualities when you conducted the agitations. You had earned popularity. At the tender age of 17-18, this was a huge plus. Very soon after that, all of us, especially people like you, faced the Emergency. You and your family faced the heat during that period. Tell us about it in detail, because people today have forgotten about it. I am sure winning the Corporation elections as a representative of

Yukrand through the Socialist party was an exhilarating experience. But after that, many activists like you had to face the harshness of Emergency. Nobody remembers these things that happened 40 years back. It was not just you, but your two small children and your husband Dilip Aralikal who faced a different kind of emergency. Tell us about it in details.

SA: Actually, it was just one year after winning the elections that the Emergency was declared. The intensity of the Left ideology had become very strong. Then suddenly, in 1975, one night, the Emergency was declared. At that time, nobody understood the meaning of Emergency. It was just the experienced political thinkers who were aware of what Emergency involved. My husband would keep telling me what it was all about and what he expected to happen. Under his guidance, I had become more or less aware of what the situation was going to be like and what was to be expected. I knew what people were likely to face. Then followed a period of total repression of the newspapers, thinkers and political activists. All the movements were stopped. There was a single clause agenda that was enforced all over India. It was a terrible period. We were prohibited from holding public meetings. But it was impossible to hold back leaders like Mrinaltai, George Fernandes and Anna S M Joshi.

We continued to work surreptitiously. Our entire army of workers worked. We carried posters and letters to and fro. We could not photocopy papers because that was also prohibited. So we used carbon papers and made 10-20 copies and distributed pamphlets. We did this for the first few months. But when the police came to know of our activities, they started making arrests on a large scale. We were their first target.

One night, all of a sudden, at around one or two o' clock, there was a banging on our door. My husband opened the door. I had delivered three months back. When my husband answered the door, he saw a jeep full of police. The Superintendent of Police (SP) himself was there because he knew that I was a woman who

could leave the babies and escape. They knew that we, my husband and I, were capable of doing anything. So they surrounded the entire building where we stayed as tenants. They knocked our door again. When we saw the police, we understood. My husband asked them, "OK, so who has to get ready? My wife or I?" The SP said, "Both of you." I replied, "No, then it will not be just the two of us, it will be the four of us. Because my children have nobody to look after them." There were no relatives, no parents, uncles, aunts, no one.

The police did not allow us to take anything from home. We were taken to the police station at three o'clock in the night. Like I said, I had delivered just three months back. While we were at the station, our house was robbed. Strangely, while it was being looted, people watched. It was a rented house, but nobody had the courage to go and intervene. The terror of the police was tremendous. Our house was looted and we were again, out on the streets. The two of us sat in the ground in the police station. In the meanwhile, 22 people were arrested from the district and brought there. We were not given a drop of water, food and nor were our children given a cup of milk. We were herded and ushered into a big vehicle and taken to Osmanabad. We were told that we would be given food there. But when we reached there, we were told that our meals would be provided at the next station. We realised their strategy. My son Yogesh, who was only two and a half years old at that time, started crying with hunger. What could we possibly give him? We could not even get out of the vehicle. We were not allowed to do anything. When the socialists around us saw this, they started saying, "Why is the child being put through so much misery? Let us wait somewhere, give us some food to eat and then we will leave."

In Osmanabad, we actually had to undertake a Satyagraha. When we were asked to get out of the vehicle for some time, we refused to get back inside until we were given food. We told them that in any case we would die, either this way or that way. So now unless we were given something to eat, we would not budge from there. So all of us were given dinner and

then taken to Nasik. In Nasik, there was a kind of Mahabharata that happened with me and my husband. The Nasik jail is completely a men's jail. Women prisoners cannot be kept there; women prisoners are housed in Pune jail. Our Socialist Party colleagues told us to go ahead. They said that since we have two children, we should get some peace-time. I suggested that my husband should take one child ahead and then I would follow him. He said no problem. I don't know how we thought of this. Probably, had he proceeded, or stayed back and asked me to go ahead, maybe he would not have been able to do anything. There was some confusion between us and I finally went ahead. The jailer over there told me that since this is not a women's jail, you will not be able to come here. Let the man behind you come. I said, the man behind me is my husband and the father of these two children. He will not come.

The jailer realised that the matter was going to blow up. So he told us that he would first clear up the registration of other prisoners and then look into our matter. He asked us to wait outside. Just then, the train arrived and the relatives of the prisoners also came to meet them. The place in front of the Nasik jail acquired the look of a fair. Then the jailer called me and said, "This is a men's prison. There is no women's jail. We will keep your husband here and we will send you to Pune." I said, "What guarantee that you will send me to Pune and not have me murdered on the way? Who is to ask you? This will not do. Either you let both of us stay here, or just send us back." A massive argument broke out. The jailer was infuriated. He decided to keep my husband in jail and drive us away. Both of us realised his strategy. My husband said that unless we did something about it, it would be dangerous for both of us. He said "You will have two small children with you. How will you take care of them? We don't even know how you will feed them the next day. We don't know whether these people are good or bad. What will you do then?"

The two of us then held each other's hands tightly and kept the children in front of us. We challenged him to keep both of us in the jail and if not, we asked him to

send us back to Osmanabad. The jailer got very angry. I was a new mother, thin, scrawny, draped in a miserable sari. He did not anticipate that I would be so sharp and a challenge to handle. He said, "This woman isn't worth a single bullet. But she is creating too much nuisance and resistance." I said, "Would you like to test me? Why not try and shoot at me? You will also be able to gauge me."

The man took in my angry, fearless stance. My husband and I must have appeared to him like demons. At that moment, my elder child started crying with fear. He did not understand what was happening. He threw his arms around us. In the meanwhile, the younger one who was in my lap, also started howling. A lot of people collected around us to witness this drama. I didn't look like a political prisoner and the crowd thought that probably I was a common criminal. But they wondered that if I was a common criminal, then how could I be confronting the jailer so fearlessly? The people started talking amongst themselves in hushed tones.

Finally, we won. We were sent back to Osmanabad. There, we came across Jung sahib. He was downright vindictive with us because we had foiled his meeting in Latur. Jung sahib held a tremendous grudge against us. He held us back in the Osmanabad police station for eight days. The conditions in the Osmanabad jail were terrible. My husband was kept with murderers. We were given a tiny room opposite his. It was so small that a bed could barely fit in there. I was housed there with my two babies. I told the jail authorities that my husband was not a murderer, he was a political prisoner and they could not keep him with hardened criminals. I asked them to allow my husband to stay with me in the small room, or else I suggested that we would sit outside and not leave.

Mercifully, we met a Superintendent of Police who was known to us. He asked who we were and when he was told that it was me, he recollected that he was the one who had arrested us once during one of our movements. He told the jail officials that we were indeed political prisoners and allowed my husband

to stay with us in the room. He arranged for some bed sheets and bedcovers for us. He ordered for a pot of water to be kept in our room.

After ten days an order was drawn in our name by Ali Yavar Jung; he deceived us. We were told that our order was for Pune jail itself. So we were directed to the Pune jail. My husband as usual said that he would drop us off first and then he would go anywhere. My children were extremely tired and they had fallen ill in these ten days. We were not able to sit for ten days and we had started suffering from severe backache. One man could not possibly look after three people. He said that he would leave me and then go to the jail. The news that a mother of two was to enter the jail shortly had spread like wild fire. Mrinaltai, Ahilyabai Rangnekar and Pramila Dandavate waited in anticipation. When they saw me, they exclaimed, "Oh! Is it you? Come, come, join us."

My husband left me there and he went to the men's jail. As soon as my husband reached there, he received an order to go to Nasik jail. He pleaded with the jail authorities saying that his children were very small and his wife was ill. The least they could do was to allow him to inform me that he was to be taken to Nasik. The policeman said that they have had enough of our nuisance. They asked him to just shut up and go to Nasik. They did not allow him to even get off the vehicle or even drink water. He was just taken away to Nasik.

The next day, a legislator, the husband of Mrs Hansabai Rajda, who was in the opposite jail, went to meet him. Yogesh was insisting on meeting his father. We took permission from the lady jailor and sent him with Hansabai in the next jail to look for his father. They searched for him a lot and asked around if there was a man by the name Dilip Aralekar. Finally, they came to know that Dilip was sent away. My child came back to the jail, his little body wracking with sobs. The harassment that we underwent in their hands was so terrible that finally I fell very seriously ill. There was a jail doctor by the name Dr Tatke. He said that I had to be operated upon in Sassoon Hospital, or else, there

were chances that I would be paralysed waist downwards. Then things began to move. My husband was brought to Pune from Nasik. But this whole process still took two to three months. Anna and other socialists tried very hard from outside and finally my husband came to Pune. In this way, the father finally saw his children and a wife met her husband.

For the next six months, we stayed in jail. I was admitted to a hospital. My family got scattered. My husband and my elder son went to the male prison in Yerwada. My younger son Jamir was taken care of by Mrinaltai, Ahilyabai and Pramilatai in the women's jail. I was languishing in Sassoon. I spent my days in this utterly miserable condition. I wrote a letter to Indirabai (Indira Gandhi) that when I was going to be operated upon, I wanted my husband and my children with me. I would agree to the operation only under that condition, or else, I did not want it. It wouldn't matter then how I died. I was ready for death. She said that we could ask for forgiveness, issue an apology and we would be set free. We said that we would not apologise at any cost. What more could they do to torture us? Now dying was the only eventuality that remained. And I was prepared for that.

Then one fine day, before the Emergency was lifted, we were released suddenly. I was on stretcher, Jamir had developed asthma and the elder son was in my husband's care. However, the members of the Socialist Party looked after me very well. They gave great love to my family. My period of illness became tolerable due to the kindness of the people of the Socialist Party. Dr. [K H]Sancheti operated upon me in his own hospital [Sancheti Hospital] without taking a single rupee for it. Before leaving, he gifted me a sari and blouse saying that I was like his own sister.

AB: Sunitatai, all this was happening, but yet you retained a phenomenal courage. You refused to apologise even under such severe hardship. So, both of you, as a couple felt compelled to resist the Emergency.

SA: Yes, we felt that it was our duty.

AB: Yes, as though, it was your responsibility. I think that whole period was that of idealism. And that idealism still exists in you. In retrospect, forty years after the Emergency, what do you feel like saying about that whole period?

SA: Well, now I feel, let us hope that people do not have to face those days ever again. People should have freedom of speech, thoughts, writing, assembly and movement.

AB: Yes, the people's voice...

SA: Should not be suppressed.

AB: A little while ago, you had started upon the topic of your political journey and your experiences along the way. For the past forty years, you have been involved in active politics. Can you tell us a little about it? After the Emergency, people participating in it split and went into different directions. Some of them entered the Congress. The Janata Dal disintegrated into smaller, different units and some people joined those. Some belonging to the Socialist Party came back to it. Some of them remained active in politics as well as socialism. You were one of those. Please tell us about the different milestones in your journey that you had chosen carefully.

SA: I never changed my political party. We went to the jail as the activists of the Socialist Party. The Janata Dal was born after the Emergency but it was conceived in the jail itself. Everybody was aware of it. When we came out of the jail, we naturally considered ourselves as members of the Janata Dal. However, within a few days, the Party developed cracks in it. It was fragmented into small groups. Thus began the politics of groupism. We belonged to a group that moved towards Congress (S). We went along with them. Finally, we merged with the Congress with Rajiv Gandhi. Though I can say that we drifted towards the Congress, I have not left the Party for the past thirty years. I have stayed firmly in the Congress. I will tell you the reason. I underwent suffering and hardship

during the Emergency. My family was practically ruined. However, when it was time for elections and offering tickets, it was suggested that I would get elected from the Samajwadi Party because everything was in favour of me. People were also in favour of giving me a ticket. But it was a male dominated culture and the Party did not offer me a ticket. They objected by saying I did not even have a grain of food to eat, so how could I possibly contest the elections? I counter-argued them. I said that had I been a common woman, I would have had bags of grains and food supplies standing in my home. But today, what had brought about this ruin? Why was I deprived of even a decent meal? It was the participation in the movement that had brought about this condition. I had thrown myself into social work.

I think the fact that I deserved brought about resentment in the party towards me. I suffered untold misery, stark poverty, my husband lost his job, and I became a handicapped person and lost my home. I was forced to stay in the cattle shed. I felt that I deserved to get some justice for this. But I did not get it from the people with socialist thinking. I was ignored and side-stepped. Though I did not contest in that election, I ran the next five elections on the ticket of the Congress Party and won all. These elections included the Nagar Parishad, two for the Zilla Parishad and now I am the director of Maharashtra Rajya Housing Finance. I was voted for from all over Maharashtra. I have been elected for the post twice. Despite all this, I have repeatedly faced humiliation. I have always participated in politics as well as social work. It is said that there cannot be two swords in one sheath. Similarly, my political and social activities cannot go hand in hand. So, it was always considered that I am a political activist and what was I doing in the area of social causes? Similarly, in political arena, I was looked at with skepticism and accused of never letting go of my socialist thoughts and opposition.

AB: This is just an attitude.

SA: Exactly. It was the same attitude towards resolving issues. I was always by-passed. I could never work

freely at a higher post with authority. Now that we are towards the end of our session, I would like to request women that please participate in the local government through the 33% reservation. Many women have come forward and are working. Whether they are allowed to actually work or not, is a topic of introspection.

AB: True, that will be a topic of research.

SA: Whatever the case is, we can say that if nothing, today at least a few women have stepped out of their homes and started going and sitting in the offices. This by itself is no mean achievement. Now, the situation is such that the 33% reservation has gone up to 50% reservation. After the percentage of reservation increased, a social activist like me realised that because of this 50%, the political parties have been able to elect one and get one free worker for the parties. I will tell you how. In those days, I would work alone. My husband never came to my office. But the present situation is that in a particular ward there would be a young man working from that ward. I contested the elections against them. After the 50% reservation, some wards became reserved exclusively for women. Then, these men started procuring tickets for their wives, sisters, mothers, mothers-in-law and so on. Most of the times, you would find that lady only at home. The letter pad will carry her name but whose pocket will carry her letter pad? It will be in that man's pocket

AB: You could call them husbands of the Panch, or the Head of the villages.

SA: So, the letter pad is invariably in the pockets of the husband. Due to this, after this 33% reservation quota, from the days of Rajiv Gandhi till date, there has been no political party that has been saintly. All of them are alike and all of them are ultimately male dominated. So, today, if you look back, in 1991, you wouldn't be able to find a woman worker of the Zilla Parishad really working with capability and dynamism. You would find most of the women saying that either the husband or the family urged her to stand for the elections. She had no interest in it and as a result, she

did not even find it her responsibility to perform.

AB: I think they do not have the autonomy.

SA: I have seen that there are many women members in different political parties. A woman member's male relatives such as her husband or may be her brother-in-law would be appointed at significant posts such as the president of the Zilla Parishad or the member, at least. The woman's signature is required and she is not consulted for anything. But today, if that woman recognises and accepts her responsibility in a true sense and makes use of the constitutional rights, then I believe that the crimes and injustice against women and their oppression can be brought under control. The closest relation that a woman can have is the one with her father but if the father himself turns into a perpetrator of crime against his own child, then who will the child turn to? Where will the woman ask for justice? Who will she expect protection from? How can she call him her own? This is a humongous challenge that is closely related to a woman's life. Today, if we can fly airplanes, then why cannot we walk the ground firmly? We need to find out the cause of it

AB: May I ask you something?

SA: Yes, sure.

AB: You have a fantastic experience of working in a political party and also work with the social perspectives. You just mentioned that there is no autonomy. At this stage in life, you still have great hopes for the poor women in the rural areas, or those who come from the castes traditionally considered low. You believe that there will be some concrete political changes and the lives of these women will undergo some kind of a transformation. You are confident of working towards this goal. You are aware that there will be some limitations in this work, yet, you are hopeful.

SA: I feel confident. Let me give you an example from Latur itself. There is this village called Talegaon that is around 20 kilometres away from Latur. There is one

man in the village who had six daughters and one son. When the first daughter was born, the man was happy that a baby had arrived in the family, irrespective of whether it was a baby girl, or a baby boy. Then five more daughters were born to him subsequently. The seventh child was a son. Can you imagine what the man did? He started sexually exploiting his second daughter from the age of eight. The child did not tell anybody but she kept confiding in her mother. The mother tried to dissuade the father but he threatened to kill the girl if the mother opposed him. She said that if one daughter died, she would still have five more children. Then the husband threatened to kill her baby boy. This put a terror in the woman's heart.

AB: So she stayed away from this gruesome exploitation?

SA: She did not make any attempts to stop him after that. Then one day, the second daughter found her father fondling the fifth daughter, aged eight, while everybody was asleep. The girl was infuriated. She realised that the man had exploited her and there was a possibility that he would not leave his other five daughters too. She confided in her sisters and made a plan. She conspired with her elder sister's husband and his friend and decided to kill the man. She sent her mother to her grandmother's place. Then she told her father that she had developed a severe stomach ache. She made him accompany her in an auto rickshaw under the pretext of going to the doctor. The three of them took him to a deep forest and killed him. His dead body was dumped in the well. It was found two three days later. She confessed that she was the one who had killed him and explained the reasons.

When I came to know about this incident, I took a couple of women with me and went to that village one evening. I moved about in the village and asked the villagers about the incident. The villagers told me that the man was a saintly man who helped everybody in the village. They refused to believe that he would indulge in something as perverse and heinous like that. They claimed that the girls were mischievous and cunning. Now, you tell me, can a child of eight come

up with such charges against her father? I had unusual experiences in that village. I met the girl's mother and she said that the girl was in jail, but she was happy. I went to meet that girl. She actually seemed happy. When I spoke with her, she said she was relieved because she knew her other sisters were now safe. She did not mind sacrificing her life for their sake. Then there was another incident in a village called Nivali, which is close to my village. It is a small place. There was a 72-year-old woman who was travelling to her native place. She was accosted by three drunk Dalit boys, aged 16, 17 and 19. They raped her. The woman tried to make them aware that she was like their grandmother, but the boys were not in their senses. And the sad part of it was that the incident was not considered important enough even in that village. (Pause)

AB: Yes, so we were talking about the incident involving a 72 year old woman in village Nivali.

SA: When I heard about the incident involving the old woman, I felt very sad. I am giving you my observation on this incident, please do not take it otherwise. But, in all the years of work that I have done, this was my first experience where the victim was from the upper caste Maratha community and the perpetrators were Dalits. So far, it has always been that the upper castes commit atrocities against the OBCs, backward castes or other underprivileged sections of the society. Invariably, girls and women from these communities are violated, raped by men from the higher castes. But this was the first incident that we heard where it was the opposite. The incident generated terrifying intensity of hatred and revenge. Homes of the Dalits were burnt down. Then, the Dalit population came together and filed a case against the upper caste people of atrocity. The boys who had committed the crime went to jail. Their relatives slapped cases against the higher caste people, so forty upper caste men from the same village also went to the jail. The unfortunate part of the tragedy was that the crime acquired a backseat Negotiations and compromises began. Each party started demanding that the other one should take the case back and then they would also withdraw the

case. Let us forget the whole incident and make peace. This kind of bargaining was heinous and despicable. That is why, if we have an organisation that works capably, then nobody will dare to suppress such incidents. Women will be aggressive and hold government and semi-government institutions responsible and exert pressure on them. Women should organise themselves and resist such crimes unitedly. If a criminal is allowed to go free after committing such a crime, he becomes bold and does not hesitate in repeating his crime. So, he has to be punished at the first incident itself so that criminals dare not commit the same act again. No doubt people involved in atrocities had to be punished but the old lady in question deserved justice.

In addition to the violation that she underwent, she also faced extreme humiliation at the hands of the society. Women in her locality tormented her with all kinds of questions. When she walked towards the temple, women actually commented on her face that she was no longer pure. So, she was raped not just physically, but she was also brutalised mentally and emotionally. We, as women, ought to stop such insensitive behaviour.

AB: This incident that you narrated was indeed very complicated. After the nineties, our society started changing. The two decades were uneasy and restless decades. Why is there no mention of those in your writing?

SA: You are right. I wrote *Hirkanicha Birhad* (The House of Hirkani) while in jail as a daily diary. I was encouraged to write about my experiences by Mangalatai Parekh and Advocate Sundaratai Nawalkar. I started writing my diary in jail. After I came out of jail, there was a lot of turmoil in the form of political, social and financial strife. My children were growing up. My husband couldn't find a job anywhere. The expenses were growing day by day. When finally he found a job, he was being paid a salary of Rs 100. We could not manage in that amount. Then I started running a general store in order to supplement my family income and take care of my children's needs. I

even ran a tea stall, a tea canteen and I also tried my hand at running a travel business. And through all this, I contested elections, participated in politics and social work. I was busy and could not continue to write. However, within next few days, you will find one more book of mine coming out. It will be the third edition of my book *Hirkanicha Birhad* that has also been translated into English. It has also been published in Urdu and received an award for it. Fa. Mu Shinde's wife translates in Gujarati and she is working on my book. A friend of mine is a Sri Lankan in the USA and she has done it in the Sinhala language. I also have a friend in Europe and she is working on it in European languages. There has been a film based on my book. Next year, when the film festival is going to be held, there is going to be a film shown on my autobiography. (Applause) And my American friend has produced it

AB: These are extremely important milestones in your life. We are all waiting very eagerly for your next book. We would welcome observations from an experienced person like you on the troubled and turbulent decade that passed.

SA: After reading *Hirkanicha Birhad*, you will realise one thing that I have given all the examples giving names of people. You will not find this in any other book, isn't it? I have mentioned by name people who made me suffer and also people who gave me love. You will find most of the autobiographies are too broad and general. But this isn't the case with my book. *Hirkaniche Birhad* has been appreciated by readers not only in Maharashtra, but even outside. The amusing part of it is that it is the men folk who buy the book but it is the women and children in the household who read it. After reading the book, they call me up. They want me to speak with the rest of their family—may be the wife, or the daughter, or the mother, mother-in-law! Once a family of five or six called me up and spoke with me. They told me that the book had given them immense courage. Sometimes, students have called me to tell me of their resolve to lead their lives based on the inspiration they have received from the book. A couple of days ago, two students came and took the book from my husband. They told him that they

give tuitions and felt that they earned too little. But after reading *Hirkaniche Birhad* they realised that money isn't less; you have to manage with whatever you earn. I have experienced many touching reactions of the readers to *Hirkaniche Birhad* and I feel that this is the biggest bounty of love that I have earned from my readers.

AB: Since you mentioned this, I will ask you about it. Very few people mention the names of the people in their autobiographies. This is absolutely fine. But there is a possibility that the people who have been so mentioned have been criticised by others. They have not been viewed in a positive light by general public after reading your account.

SA: It doesn't matter to me. They behaved with us in the manner they felt was right under those circumstances.

AB: You wrote with honesty.

SA: Yes, but nobody resented me for my honesty. They said I wrote the truth. That did not cause any trouble for me. Because you need to show that kind of a courage. If you try to hide or cover up the mistakes of others then it means you are actually encouraging your opponents.

AB: What about certain internal and private issues?

SA: I have the firm support of my husband. He has always helped me in resolving issues but he also believes that we need to be true to ourselves.

AB: Since you mentioned your partner once again, I would like to ask you something. You and your husband Dilip Aralikal have worked together on the extremely important issue of intercaste and interreligious marriages and you still continue to work on them. I wanted to know, from what economic strata do these couples come? And when you help these couples in getting married, do you get these marriages registered under the Special Marriage Act?

SA: So far, we have helped in getting 164 such couples married. And I am happy to say this that all these couples are leading their lives contentedly. Many of them are the proud parents of beautiful babies. So, you see, I have become a grandmother many times over! Both of us have been doing this work under the guidance of Dr. Narendra Dabholkar who is spearheading the movement against superstition. He has initiated this and built up an entire team. We are a part of his team. Our whole team works together. So far, we have got 164 couples married. You mentioned the economic strata of the couples involved. Let us say, there is no consideration of the economic background. Two young hearts come together. Sometimes, people say things like, we travelled together in a bus and we fell in love. Someone will say that I got a missed call and I fell in love with the person over a missed call. The triggers can be many. People don't look at the financial aspect. But when we counsel them before marriage, we ask them about this aspect. We suggest that at least one of the two should be earning because after inter-caste marriage, all the benefits from the home and family stop. Families and relatives from both the sides cut off ties with the couple. Then it is just the two of you, and if there are no financial resources, then it leads to clashes and skirmishes between the couple. Then the marriage fails. We caution them against all such eventualities. I would like to tell you with pleasure about a carpenter in our village. There was a college girl who passed by his work place every day. They fell in love with each other and decided to get married. The boy told us that though he was not educated, he wanted his wife to study further and encourage her to lead the life that she wished to. The second example is from Mumbai. The girl was from Mumbai and we got her married to a boy from Udgir. The girl was from the Joshi community. Her parents fixed her marriage with a boy who sat at the railway station and made predictions about people's future with the help of a parrot. The girl was naturally worried. How much would the boy earn by making predictions like this? How will I be able to run a home on his earnings? She was in a confused state of mind. She escaped from her parents' home and came to me. We got her married. We had the papers of their marriage

registration with us and the two of them came to our place at night to collect them. It was a little late in the night and all of us sat chatting. The girl said, my mother and grandmother kept harping on the boy's ability to make predictions about other people's lives. But what kind of an astrologer is he who couldn't even predict that his wife-to-be would run away with another man?! See how smart this young generation is! If given the right opportunity, they are capable of achieving so much! I have learnt so much wisdom from the 164 couples whom I got married!

AB: I think you should write a book on your experiences. (Laughs)

SA: Certainly. It is in the pipeline. We get these couples married in proper Latur, in their municipality office. My husband goes there as a witness. Madhav Bavne Sir also goes as a witness.

AB: Are these the activists of the Andhashradhha Nirmoolan Committee?

SA: See, any of our activists can go and sign as a witness. But when the couple comes from absolute rural areas, we recommend that they should register their marriage in at least one of their villages, in the Gram Panchayat or the Nagar Palika. Because, till the time their marriage is not registered, there is no meaning to it and no standing. More importantly, this is necessary for your daughter's security. We always make it clear to the boys that in case of any unpleasantness between the boy and the girl later on, we first take the side of the girl. This is told to them in advance. From the point of view of the girl's protection, registration of the marriage is very important. Hence after marriage, we pursue the matter of registration very thoroughly. (Laughs). We get a solid, final copy made.

AB: So, you see it through.

SA: Yes, we see it through.

AB: Well, now this question is a little different. The year 1975 was declared as the International

Women’s Year. You were in the Municipal Council then. During that year, many different women-centric programs were held. In the book, it has been mentioned that while many different schemes were carried out, there was also the family planning operation for women. So, it seems as though the entire responsibility of family planning comes on to the woman. What do you feel about this now? Do you think men should undergo vasectomy? Would you like to adopt another approach now?

SA: No. There is a tremendous difference between my knowledge and experience then and now. I believe that now I am better equipped to try and strike a balance in the society. In 1975, when I was working, I was around 16-17 years old. I did not understand much. I had no particular stand regarding supporting men or women. I simply wished to do something and not remain a mute spectator. My mind was convinced about this one thing. I worked through this idea. I accept that this was my ignorance. I did not realise that this involved a great injustice to the woman. Today, I stand firmly behind the woman. I speak responsibly and act responsibly. However, this sense of responsibility was not there in me at that time. I was an amateur activist and I think my actions happened due to lack of experience. Today, situation is different. Now I feel that even men must undergo the operation for family planning. In fact, I would say that they need to do it and we have started working towards convincing them.

AB: When I look at your journey, I get a feeling that your health did not cooperate with you. Your back troubles and your physical suffering is the evidence. However, I can see that despite this one weakness, you befriended your illnesses. You managed to keep your life active despite so much bodily ailments.

SA: I am glad to share this with you. After reading my book *Hirkaniche Birhad*, a lady doctor from Saswad called me up out of concern. She asked me if I was

handicapped or bedridden. She said that she was worried about me. She knew the seriousness of that operation. And I had undergone it not just once, but twice. I told her, “Madam, by God’s grace and your blessings, I am still not bedridden. And I will not ever be bedridden. I will remain active till the last moment, so long as my body allows me to move. And I will always stand by justice. I have received the strength to fight injustice since childhood and my ill health has never come in the way of my struggle.

AB: It doesn’t interfere?

SA: No, not at all.

AB: I watched you some time back while you were climbing down the stairs. And I noticed that you don’t let your physical limitations come in the way.

SA: You should not

AB: You display this firmness not to let it be an obstacle in your path. From where do you get your energy?

SA: Today, my husband is sitting among the audience. I am saying this in front of him, that there is just one issue regarding me that he frequently complains about. He says that I work too hard at home and outside. He complains even to my son and my daughter-in-law that they should try to convince me. I ask him not to complain (laughs) because I want to continue to work till I can.

AB: Now, this will be a rather delicate question. Raising children together is a part of the couple’s married life. While you continued to bring them up, you witnessed innumerable ups and downs in your social and personal life. All through this, you may have experienced intense feelings of tenderness, anguish and joy as you looked after your children. Can you share a few experiences?

SA: There are several experiences. I often tell others that I went through a lot of hardship in childhood and

often slept hungry. But when I came out of the jail, my circumstances were really bad. I was a corporator at that time. Had there been anybody else in my place, the person would have surely turned corrupt, fixed a commission and prospered and looked after the children. But we did not do that and nor will we ever do it. This was a trying period for me. I could not even give my babies milk for the first three to four months. I feel really sad when I think about it. Instead, I would sieve jowar flour and mix that white colored flour in water and feed them as milk. Nobody will believe this, but the fact was that we could not afford to give our children milk. My children never asked or demanded anything that they saw others possess. Since they displayed that kind of an understanding, I believe that our marriage worked out successfully. (Tearful)

AB: Why did you name your son Jamir? Tell me the story behind it.

SA: When Jamir was born, it was the period of Emergency in the country. (Pause)

AB: There are a lot of tender and heartwarming incidents while bringing up our children. When I look at your family, I can see that both your children proved academically brilliant. They always stood first in their exams and school. The two of you showered them with love as parents and there is great family bonding. Tell me a little about it. Also, tell the story behind your son's name Jamir.

SA: When my elder son Yogesh was born, we had very little experience of social life. My husband started calling him by the name Yogesh and it stayed with him. When my second son was born, I was in the hospital for my delivery. All our communist and socialist friends daily discussed the baby's name. All of them were suggesting different names. Then some people suggested the name 'Jilas' who was a big communist leader. However, my husband brought to their notice that our people will distort the name Jilas and soon turn it into Vilas. And we didn't want Vilas. After some more discussion, my husband declared that

he would be naming his son 'Jamir' which was also the name of a Prime Minister of a country. Now all this discussion took place behind my back. Then some friends expressed their doubts to him that Jamir sounded like a Muslim name so how could we keep it? My husband explained to them the meaning of the word Jamir and how it was relevant to those days and circumstances. Jamir meant the one who would find his way through circumstances. It means a person who will follow his conscience. A person with integrity. We felt that the name was very meaningful. However, when my son went to his medical college, he suffered greatly due to his name. All the fellow students targetted him thinking he was a Muslim. But my son never revealed his caste. He did not allow things to affect him. After my son completed his MBBS, he was required to do his internship for six months in rural areas and six months in urban areas. Since he was away from home for so long, I arranged for his rural internship in the neighbouring village. After completing six months, they are supposed to get a certificate from the senior doctor over there. My son approached him and requested him to issue a certificate so that he could take his further admission. When he asked for the certificate, the doctor did not even look up. The doctor next to him said, "Doctor, Jamir is talking to you." This doctor did not even give a glance and merely said that these people were a nuisance. The other doctor said, "Jamir is our Madam's son". This did not penetrate the doctor's head. My son is a phenomenally strong boy mentally. He told us that the only thought that came to his mind was that if he suffered only due to his name, he couldn't imagine what the boys from the community went through by way of discrimination. Finally he got his certificate.

AB: This is one side of it. But your family displays a remarkable bonding among the family members. There is complete trust and the relationships are meaningful. If he got teased as a child, he did not even come and tell you.

SA: He has inherited this patience and restraint from his father. His father never got angry with us. Even if we made a mistake he never criticised us. Once it so

happened that after I was released from jail, my husband lost his voice for one full year. He had to write and communicate with us. I ran a general store then. He also sat in the store. Sometimes, when the customers asked him the price of something, he would write it on a notebook and convey. We spent one year in such a condition. We needed Rs 25 for an operation for his condition but we did not have that.

AB: When was this?

SA: This was in the year 1978. We did not have even that 25 rupees. My husband used to go alone to Sassoon Hospital. He took help of the people over there and reached the railway station. He would sleep there in the station since there were no relatives. He would come back to Latur in that operated, delicate state. (Sobs). These events remained deeply etched in my children's mind. They understood that their parents work extremely hard. Their father had undergone operation and he needed people. The children could not help. All these traumatic experiences matured my children very early in life. They grew up into thoughtful adults and started thinking about the future. My family has evolved like this. That is why, today, Sunita Aralekar is known by her name independently. Yogesh Aralekar is known by his own name. Yogesh Aralekar has his own identity. Dr Jamir is recognised independently. My daughters-in-law also have their own identity. Shilpa is a doctor. Akhila is an engineer. All of us are extremely proud of one another. Each one of us has made a place for himself/herself in the society on the basis of our knowledge, research and achievements. We have created our own worlds but we remain close and a happy, contented family. We do not have money even today as a family but we are very satisfied. (Applause)

AB: This is indeed unique. Very few people enjoy the privilege of having such close and meaningful relationships. Both of you have contributed greatly as a couple and nurtured these relationships. While we are on the topic of children and family, let me ask you this. While you were growing up, you experienced a different kind of childhood. So

did you make a conscious effort to be the mother that you never got?

SA: I never did anything deliberately. We simply carried out our natural duties as parents. I face no problems from anyone in the family— neither my sons, nor my daughters-in-law. In fact, I am extremely proud of all of them. As far as the issue of caste is concerned, it is too deeply ingrained in our society. I have been married for 42 years but caste is one issue that has pricked me even now. I will tell you an incident that occurred two years back. All of us were chatting one day. My husband was not present. We talked about my children's achievements of becoming doctor, going to USA. One of our close friends said that my children had made use of their mother's name or father's name. Father is a Brahmin. He hinted that intelligent children are born only to Brahmin mothers. A Dalit woman cannot produce brilliant children. But I insist that in my entire life, I have never taken advantage or misused my caste.

AB: Your children always stood in the merit list, didn't they?

SA- Yes, they have always been in the merit list.

AB: You accepted your circumstances without complaints. This is one aspect. However, you are also contented in your life and family. You have played a phenomenal role in creating this sense of fulfillment in your family life. You will be celebrating your sixtieth birthday in another two to three days. When I look at your journey, I see Sunita Aralekar as a person, or rather, Shivkant's Sunita as a granddaughter who was aware of her grandfather's efforts and hardship, being transformed into Ankita, Anjali and Rohit's grandmother. Your emotional horizons expanded vastly on many different levels during this journey and evolved you as a human being. You have two daughters-in-law- Akhila and Shilpa. What would you like to say as a mother-in-law about this relationship? This is a very tender relationship and has been distorted greatly but it is not really so.

SA: No, we do not have such atmosphere in our home at all. My daughters-in-law take care of me and treat me with utmost care. Even today, they bring hair pin for me without fail because they know that I tie my hair with a pin. They take very good care of me. I don't have to tell them anything nor give any instructions. The reason why this relationship has been vilified is that no independence is given to them. After getting married, when a young couple goes to the market, the husband enthusiastically buys a sari for his new wife. The mother gets very annoyed thinking that the girl got married just recently and there are so many new saris in the house, then why does he have to buy another one? So, it begins from here. And the end is never pleasant. That is why, it is my sincere suggestion to all those women who already are and are likely to be mothers-in-law that give your sons and their wives independence. Let them be; let them live... if their cupboards are full of clothes and saris and they still wish to buy a new one from the market, then let them do so! There is no need for you to impose your thoughts in between. If it reaches you, then you may speak up. But creating disturbances intermittently and putting a break on their lives has to be stopped. If you are earning, please go ahead and earn. Give us what we want and we need. Today, I am proud to share this with all of you, that we have not saved even five rupees for ourselves. Yet, we have named our home as 'Dollar'. There is an amusing background to it. Tai just asked me, "Why have you named it as 'Dollar'? The reason for this is that we could not buy a home for ourselves through our earnings. That is why, my sons and daughters-in-law bought this house and gifted it to us. This house is the effort of honest hard work of my children. That is why, I have named it as 'Dollar'. The point is, we need to interfere a little less. Look at us today, we both, husband and wife do not have an income even of five rupees. But today both of us live lavishly, luxuriously and are completely dependent upon my sons and daughters-in-law for our survival. I do not earn even five paise of interest on any savings. Under such circumstances, I think it is meaningless to keep a constant watch on what the children are spending, how they are spending and such petty matters. Give them their freedom. If you

don't want the utensils in the kitchen to clash and create noise, then rearrange them slightly so that, there will be no crowding in the kitchen. If we take certain precautions, then the relationship between a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law will not be maligned. It will be more like a mother-daughter relationship. Women must ensure this and it will certainly create the basis for peaceful life as a senior citizen. I have learnt a lot from this relationship and I have been lucky enough to have extremely good daughters-in-law.

AB: This goes to illustrate how your horizons have constantly expanded on personal as well as social level. There are many tender, critical moments in our life that often remain under wraps and unspoken. Maybe today you let them out and spoke freely with us. Today, all of us, on behalf of SPARROW and all those present here, the audience as well as the organisers, we salute your undying spirit and energy towards life and your eternal optimism and congratulate you. (Applause)

SA: I am thankful to all of you for listening to me patiently. Please consider me as your elderly friend, and I take this opportunity to invite all of you to visit me, and do also call me again.



End Notes:

Yukrand (Yuvak Kranti Dal): It is a movement started by young students in 1949 in Pune. Its acronym is Yukrand. Young people influenced by the ideology of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar and Ram Manohar Lohia, were mainly involved in the movement. Its main objective was to struggle to create a class-free, caste-free and progressive society, and fight the liberation of Dalits in a non-violent manner. The movement under the leadership of Dr Kumar Saptarshi, was at its peak from 1959 to 1979 in Pune, Marathwada and Mumbai. During Emergency many of its activists were imprisoned. The

organisation split into different groups after the Emergency. Many like Kumar Saptarshi, entered politics and joined the Janata Party. The organization was reformed after five years. At present, Dr Kumar Saptarshi is the president of this organisation and Sandeep Barve is the secretary.

Vaidya Sir: (Shankar Vaidya) was a Marathi poet and writer from Maharashtra and husband of the famous writer Sarojini Vaidya. He was an educationist and also a speaker and announcer. He used to be called "Sir", both out of respect and due to his background as a teacher. He died on 23 September 2014 in Mumbai.

S M Joshi: Shreedhar Mahadev Joshi also known as **S M Joshi**, was a freedom fighter, Member of Parliament, and leader of Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti. Born 12 November 1904, in Junnar, Pune, he is considered one of the stalwarts of the socialist movement. Well-known as a social worker, he was the Chairman of the Praja Socialist Party (PSP) and the Samyukta Socialist Party (SSP) and was a founder member of the Janata Party. He was a member of the All-India Congress Socialist Party. He participated in the Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti's drive for a unilingual Marathi speaking Maharashtra state and he was active in setting up workers' unions and working for the cause of the Dalits in Maharashtra. He became a State Assembly member in 1957, and secured a Lok Sabha seat in 1967. S M Joshi died in 1989.



**PHOTOGRAPHS FROM
SILVER JUBILEE CELEBRATION EVENT
CONVERSATION WITH SUNITA ARALIKAR
OCTOBER, 2014**



Aruna Burte in conversation with Sunita Aralika



Dr C S Lakshmi with Sunita Aralika & Aruna Burte




Dr C S Lakshmi with Sunita Aralika, Dilip Aralika & Aruna Burte




Sunita Aralika with Dilip Aralika, C S Lakshmi, Veena Poonacha, Urmila Pawar, Sudha Arora & others

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ALL ILLUSTRATIONS: SPARROW ARCHIVES
EDITOR: Dr C S Lakshmi
CONSULTING EDITOR: Charanjeet Kaur
DESIGN AND LAYOUT: Pooja Pandey



SNL 39 supplement
Publication Number 94
Published by: Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women
The Nest
B-101/201/301, Patel Apartment, Maratha Colony Road, Dahisar (E),
Mumbai-400068
Phone: 022 2828 0895, 2896 5019

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