

## **Vidya Bal**

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*Vidya Bal was a veteran feminist journalist, author and editor based in Pune. She was also a well-known social activist in the women's liberation movement in India who dedicated her life to fighting for the rights of women. She passed away on January 30, 2020. A tribute.*



During the late 1950s, Vidya Bal worked for All India Radio- Akashvani, Pune. In 1964, at the age of 27 years, she joined the editorial staff of *Stree*, a women's magazine in Marathi sponsored by the Kirloskar Groups of Industries. Her articles covered a wide range capturing women in search for an identity; the struggles, dreams, achievements of women from different stratas of society. Her writings touched the lives of women from different generations, educated women with empathy, sensitivity and women's agency. She became a popular figure among the Marathi speaking intelligentsia. She took over as editor of *Stree* and under her leadership, the circulation of STREE soared within Maharashtra and India and abroad among Marathi speaking readers. Vidya Bal's involvement in various social movements in general and women's movement got reflected in the coverage of STREE. She continued working as its full-time editor till 1986.

### **Vidyatai and the Women's Liberation Movement**

The post emergency period (1977 onwards) was marked by massive upsurge of women's protests in Maharashtra that signified solidarity among women from different professions and work status. Newly formed women's groups, women's wings of left parties, women members of progressive groups and individual women professionals rallied around Women's Liberation Coordination Committee-WLCC (in Marathi- *Stree Mukti Andolan Sampark*

*Samiti*) provided a participatory platform for secular, democratic, pro-poor women activists and sympathisers.

I met Vidya Bal for the first time in 1978 at a WLCC conference in Apte Prashala, Pune. Women from three generations attended the conference --- workers, school and college teachers, nurses, tribal agricultural women, devadasis, Dalit activists, writers, journalists, trade union activists and home makers. All mingling with one another during group discussions, listening raptly to each speaker whether they were veterans like Mrinatai, Ahalyatai, Manjutai, Tara Reddy tai, Malini Tulpule tai or Indutai or young tribal women. I had returned after a long march of riot affected villages of Marathwada and had gone to attend this meeting in Pune with the report on atrocities on Dalit women during riots that engulfed 1200 villages of Marathwada after renaming of Marathwada University as Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University, Aurangabad. Though I was new to this WLCC, Vidyatai spoke to me and listened to my experiential reporting of Marathwad Riots and atrocities on Dalit women carefully. She also introduced me to editors of several Marathi newspaper (*Shramik*) and magazine (*Purva* edited by Dinkar Sakrikar and *Yukrand* edited by Ajit Sarbar) who published Marathi translation of the report.

During 1978-1985, I was representing Feminist Network (1978-1980) and Forum Against Oppression of Women (1980-1985) in WLCC Conferences in Pune. It also facilitated my rapport with feminists in Pune and with Vidyatai, though she was much older than me. During 1985, we met often in meetings regarding 'UN End of the Women's Decade (1985-1995)' evaluation meetings. For the Nairobi Conference of UN in 1985, Vidyatai and I had the same sponsor and we decided to travel together from Mumbai to Nairobi via Addis Ababa. Both of us had massive number of posters, booklets, books for distribution in the International Conference in which delegates from 165 countries had registered. We decided that while travelling, she would look after our bags and bundle of posters and I would go to different counters for checking in, stamping on passport, foreign exchange as in those days we had run around a lot for these chores in India as well as in the African countries. During our stay for a day in Addis Ababa while going to and returning from Nairobi, we had first-hand experience of drought in Ethiopia. We discussed colonialism and slavery in Africa, Esther Boserup's book on *Women Role in Economic Development*, custom of FGM that was highly debated by the Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWRD), role of Indians in African Countries. In Addis Ababa both were also enchanted by variety of cactus- Old Lady Cactus, Bunny Ears Cactus, Star Cactus, Moon Cactus, Prickly Pear Cactus, Chin Cactus, Easter Cactus, Barrel Cactus, Saguaro Cactus, Queen of the Night Cactus. We also got *gyan* about the importance of rural-urban connectivity for disaster management. We saw international drought relief aid could not reach the starving people in the interiors due to absence of roads and airdrop of food packets was resulting in lot of wastage and did not reach the starving villagers.

In Nairobi, I noticed that Vidyatai had a huge fan following of readers/subscribers of *Stree* settled in different African countries. In the 10 days of the conference and a long journey with a halt in Addis Ababa, I never felt a generation gap in my personal and political interactions with her. At the Nairobi Conference, there were feminists of 185 countries. Vidyatai interacted with them all with great humility and in the spirit of a learner. Vidyatai was always open to new ideas, had a child's curiosity and the helping hands of solidarity and support.

*Nari Samata Manch (Women Equality Forum)*

Vidya Bal was one of the founders of Nari Samata Manch in 1981 to provide institutional support to women survivors of violence and discrimination in terms of legal assistance, motivational counselling and dealing with police. During the initial years of her rigorous work, she realised that most violence perpetrated on women was for dowry. She and her associates were quite radical in their approach with the harassers, staging protests in public places. Women in their counselling centres were given the freedom to decide as to what kind of reaction or justice they wanted. Even the harassers were invited to discuss the issue in order to deliver a fair decision. NSM came up with travelling exhibition of extremely effective poster series against dowry murders and legal rights of women after a young woman, Manjushree Sarada was brutally murdered for greed of dowry by her husband and wealthy in-laws. These posters were later printed by the government of Maharashtra in thousands and distributed throughout the state. Nari Samata Manch fought against sex selection abortions of female foetuses, organised nurses working in private nursing homes and public hospitals, supported sexual minorities and transgender, and survivors of domestic violence along with campaign and advocacy work. NSM also started a Speak Out centre for women so that women could get a democratic space to verbalise their inner turmoil, dreams, dilemmas, challenges and aspirations. Vidyatai travelled extensively within Maharashtra's remote places along with young feminists from NSM. She never demanded special attention and patiently listened to all.

She also played pivotal role in formulation of Women's Policy by Government of Maharashtra and capacity building of women elected representatives in the Panchayati Raj Institutions after 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional amendments in 1994 that granted 33 per cent reservations of seats to women in the urban and rural local self-government bodies.

When the movement of young women for entry into sanctum sanctorum of Shani Singnapur was initiated by young women in Maharashtra, Vidyatai along with Pushpatai Bhawe went on a hunger strike not because they wanted to enter the temple, but to express their solidarity with the young women spearheading the campaign for temple entry. Vidyatai, along with Adv. Neelima Vartak, filed a public interest litigation in the Bombay High Court in 2016, demanding the enforcement of a law permitting women in sanctum sanctorum of temple and worship for all in Hindu religious places and on 1-4-2016, got the judgement in favour of temple entry for women. Their Public Interest Litigation sought implementation of provisions of Maharashtra Hindu Place of Worship Act, 1956 related to entry of women at Shani Shingnapur temple. The High Court accepted their plea, paving the way for women's right to temple entry at Shani Shingnapur temple in Ahmednagar district, which was acted upon by the young crusader, Trupti Desai of Bhumata Brigade that was also fighting against menstrual taboos based on concept of 'purity' and 'pollution' that prevented menstruating women from temple entry.

### ***Milun Saarya Jani: A Feminist Monthly in Marathi***

She was one of the pioneers of women's rights movement in Pune during early 1970s. At that time, she was extremely popular editor of widely circulated weekly in Marathi, *STREE*. When her increasing involvement in the women's movement made it difficult to survive in *STREE*, she quit. Maharashtra Women Writers Forum made a public appeal to make contribution to start an independent feminist journal in Marathi that would provide democratic platform to all progressive ideas for women's rights. Thus, *Milun Saarya Jani* (i.e. All of Us Coming Together) in 1989. Her respect for plural perspective in the women's movement endeared her to across ideological spectrum from Gandhian-liberal-socialists and

feminists. The thrust areas of *Miloon Saarya Jani* as visualised by Vidya Bal were to take idea of gender equality beyond women's movement, to create bridge between rural and urban women, create a space for women to express and capturing their voices, promote plural perception of women's question and challenge monolithic understanding of feminism. She visualised the magazine not as the mouth-piece of women's movement but as a social magazine that would provide democratic space to all progressive thoughts by individual women facing variety of intersectionalities based on caste, class, religion, ethnicity and education. When I submitted the Report on 'Socioeconomic Status of Muslims in Maharashtra' in 2013 to the Maharashtra State Minority Commission, she asked me to write an exhaustive report on Muslim Women's Status in Maharashtra for publication in *Milun Saarya Jani*.

### **Literary contributions of Vidyatai**

Vidyatai was also acclaimed for her literary contributions---essays, biography and novels in Marathi. In *Samwad* (Dialogue) she has used the form of conversation to highlight women's concerns. Her other well-known books are *Katha Gaurichi* ( Story of Gouri), *Tumachya Majhyasathi* (For You and Me), *Aparajitanche Nihshwas* (Sigh of Undefeated), *Shodh Swatahacha* (In Search of Self), *Kamalaki* (Biography of Kamala and novel *Valvantatil Vat* (*Desert Path*)). She wrote this with a conviction that there was an urgent need to gender sensitise the Indian youth and convince them that gender equality would not emasculate men. Her erudite and dignified persona reflected in her creative writings also. All her writings drove the feminist message of the emancipation of women and striving for women's rights.

In 2009, Vidyatai received UNFPA Laadli Media Awards for Lifetime Achievement for Gender Sensitivity by Population First, Mumbai and many more for her dedicated efforts for women's rights. In her speech while accepting Laadli Media Award "We are working on breaking the patriarchal stereotypes. We want to create awareness that it is about being a good human being—and not about being a "feminine woman" or a "manly man." Only then, we can aspire for an equitable society." She received Pune Ratna award in June 2018 and Shirish Pai Award in December 2019.

Vidyatai was a towering personality in Maharashtra's progressive milieu and stalwart social activist. She was a highly respected feminist for her warm, affectionate and welcoming nature. She had a fan-following among four generations as she was ready to listen to them with genuine interest and enter into a dialogue with everyone. For more than five decades, she was politically and intellectually active feminist who stuck her neck out on important matters touching lives of the downtrodden and marginalised people. She was a true socialist feminist who firmly believed that women's liberation could not be achieved without the liberation of humankind from the clutches of economic exploitation, socio-cultural oppression, caste-based discrimination and religious bigotry.

She has passed on her legacy of feminism not only to her scientist daughter, Vinita Bal who is a member of Saheli, Delhi, but to thousands of girls and women, all over Maharashtra who found in Vidyatai their role model.