

SUDHA BHARADWAJ

Interviewed by Rajashri Dasgupta

Sudha Bharadwaj (b 1961) has been associated with the trade union movement in Chhattisgarh for more than 25 years. She is general secretary of the Chhattisgarh unit of the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) and a member of Women against Sexual Violence and State Repression (WSS). She lives in Bilaspur with her daughter and works with Janhit, a group of lawyers who support anti-displacement struggles.

Rajashri Dasgupta (RD): Tell me a little bit about yourself, where you were born and which year?

Sudha Bharadwaj (SB): I was born on 1st of November 1961 so I am just about little less than a week half a century old. I was born in America and I was an unplanned child (laughs). My parents had gone for their post doctoral study to America and I was an unplanned child. So probably they had a great difficulty to manage...(laughs). I unexpectedly arrived on the scene.

RD: Who was your mother?

SB: My mother was Professor Krishna Bharadwaj. She was a very well-known economist and I think very she would have been a person you would have liked to interview maybe (laughs) in her own right, as a very well-known economist and as a founder of a very interesting department – Centre for Economics Studies and Planning in Jawaharlal Nehru University. And she had a lot of very interesting insights about what she felt about women's work, women's labour, etc. She had written about some of these things also. She was my mother. She is no longer alive, she passed away on 8th March 1992. So its nearly 20 years now, 19 years. My father is still alive...professor Ranganath Bharadwaj. My parents separated at a very early age.

RD: He is also an economist?

SB: He is also an economist. And actually theirs was a love marriage. She belonged to the Kannada Saraswat community, she was a Konkani. Her maiden name was Chandavarkar. And she was a very major influence in my life. My father is a Kannadiga and they had a love marriage. They met in Bombay University. Both of them were students. And unfortunately the marriage was a stormy one it didn't last very long. And by the time I was four years of age, my parents had already separated. So basically I would say, I was...I am brought up by my mother.

RD: I will come back to your *maa* and *baba* but tell me when you were born in the US, your parents were students then?

SB: Yes, they were students and I actually got an American nationality which I renounced at the age of 21 and I have become an Indian national.

RD: And how many years were you in the US?

SB: No. that was just one year when we came back but after that I came back to Bombay

RD: And Krishna was there in Bombay?

SB: She was in Bombay. She was in the Bombay University. And then later on when I was about four, she got an opportunity to go to Cambridge University that was also the time when I think my parents were not getting on too well...1965 or so. That was the time when she managed to go to Cambridge University and I accompanied her. So I was in England from the age of four to 11, which means my primary education was in England. I think that was also very significant. Those were the good days of public education system in Britain.

RD: What do you remember of England? Your education?

SB: Well first of all, because we were in a university town so it was not like being in London. It was only at the fag end that we experienced racism I mean more and more racist kind of things started happening with us. But before that it was a university town, we had a lot of students dropping in, because it had the International Students Centre and we saw a lot of black students, African students, Asian students at the time. And our house used to be (a place) very lively almost all homesick Indian students used to come to have a proper Indian particularly vegetarian meal [they] used to have a tough time.

RD: You don't have siblings?

SB: I don't have siblings. I am the only child.

RD: And at that time your father did not come (to the UK)?

SB: No, my father did not come and actually that served as a period of separation prior to their divorce. I think they got divorced when I was about 10 or so. Unfortunately my memories of my parents' marriage are not very nice.

RD: You miss your father a lot...

SB: See actually...I have some memories of his affection but I also have a lot of memories of very very serious fights between them. And that used to really frighten me. I think there was one incident where I locked myself up in the bathroom and I was so paranoid that I couldn't open the door. I must have been three or four. It goes back to then. And also there was the usual recrimination, etc. in the marriage and I remember once there was a very heated argument and I hugged my mother and said why don't you just say yes to whatever he is saying. I think that was the time when my mother decided that it was having a very bad effect on her child. And she agreed for a separation.

My father remarried...my mother never remarried. And one thing I must say is something which I [feel] as a lawyer now, (and) many times I meet women who are in distress in their marriage, but I really appreciate the dignity with which she [my mother] got over the

marriage because she didn't demand anything from him. But she said look here...I want custody of my child, I want no arguments about custody and my child is not going to any court and just leave me alone. I know that it is a right of women to (may be) get maintenance for their children and particularly in a case when the woman cannot stand up on her own to feed them (this) is very important I am not denying the importance of it but sometimes the desire to get revenge becomes so overwhelming, but it did not poison her [my mother's] mind at all. And another thing I must say for my mother is that despite a very bitter relationship that she never sought to keep me away from my father. Of course when I was very young there was no question but when I was nine or ten, many times if I did well in school, she would encourage me, [ask] whether I wanted to write a letter to my father, she would say go ahead. And she never complained to me about him or told me any tales about him. And the first time when I sat down and talked about what her marriage was like was I think when I was going through my divorce.

RD: It was many years later?

SB: Many, many years later. So she never tried to poison my mind against him. When I for example, I got through the IIT examination. That was quite [an achievement] you know, she said if you want to, write to him. So I think if he had chosen to keep communication, she would not have prevented him. It's a different matter that I did finally meet him only after she died.

RD: So you never met your father regularly?

SB: Ya, actually later on when I did meet him, I think by that time I was myself married and had adopted a little girl and I had already decided on a life of activism. And when I met him, my memory of him...was [of a] huge powerful...towering and fearful person.....I was shocked because I found a very sad old man who almost sort of broke down. But I felt afraid to continue any interaction because probably at this stage of life he might have (gotten) some expectations of me but I was in no position to give him any kind of middle class comfort or even emotional support. I really did not have that kind of bonding with him. So I thought better not to raise such expectations in him because it would be very unfair. He was a very lonely person by then and I think the second marriage also had not worked out, so he was all alone.

RD: You have mentioned that Krishna was a major influence in your growing up life. And I have always kept hearing so much about Krishna all the time, tell me a little more about her.

SB: She was a very simple person, a very diligent academic, a very warm teacher. I remember always our house was full of all those students who were not good at English, who had come from a rural background, were not able to cope with the university system...they would come and ask for help. Some Iranian students, who were not able to...

RD: But did it make you feel resentful?

SB: Yes...of course...*of course*. (I would)...every time I would say oh! One of your students has come and would very grumpily go upstairs. I did feel that she gave them too much

attention and so on. But the other thing that I keep telling people when I am [asked] do you think that a working woman doesn't give enough time to her child, that's absolute rubbish. I think it was very important for me to have a role model like her, very very important. A person who was absolutely [independent] you see we had no men in our house. So from paying bills, to travelling, to packing houses, to dealing with [difficult people]..she dealt with everything. Matter of factly. I mean there was no brother or father or anybody to lean on and we never thought that there was something which we couldn't do and that was important. Of course it did mean that you were coming home, letting oneself in with the keys, having bananas and sometimes in my childhood [I] used to complain that oh...other people's mothers are at home.. But I think overall she being [a working woman] [was a] very... important part of my becoming what I became. We always had very interesting books around, interesting discussions, the JNU campus also was very much a part of my childhood.

RD: So you grew up basically in JNU later on?

SB: Yes. She was in the Delhi University initially for a year or two and then she came to found the Center for Economics Studies and Planning and that was a very interesting group of people – Prabhat and Utsa Pattnaik, Amit Bhaduri, Sunanda Sen. Each one in their own right was a very important intellectual. And so I was always surrounded by this kind of atmosphere. The JNU campus was also very important because it was a very safe place. Because you could just roam around, you could find young men and women roaming around [at late hours]. And even then, it was a very active campus and the notion of activity on that campus was very healthy. There was a lot of political activity for example [in student] elections. There was no kidnapping, beating up, no *gundagardi* for the election...on the other hand there was lot of hot political debate on Albania and you know, all kinds of esoteric subjects which were sometimes quite irrelevant (*laughs*).

RD: So that was the atmosphere in the '70s?

SB: Yes. I remember very clearly. I think I was in tenth or eleventh standard, when Indira Gandhi lost the election in 1977.

RD: Ya in '77. I still remember the students taking out a *julus* (rally) so all those events were very much there.

RD: After your school what did you do?

SB: Initially, for a little while I went to the Lady Irwin School which is a Bengali school. Basically set up by Bengalis. That was for a shorter time and basically my [Board exams].....all my tenth, twelfth etc. was from Central School. That was an important thing, because I think [back] now I mean the central school I went to in IIT [Delhi] for example, the children of the professors would be there and the children of the *karmacharis* also would be there. (They) used to travel by bus, public transport and now the generation which I see is very protected I mean most of them have [to be] (been) dropped, (I mean) taken to classes, dropped to classes and all that. (and) none of them are in the public education system anymore.

RD: But in the 70s public education still was something one wanted to be a part of.

R: Yes...yes. In '79 I gave the IIT Joint Entrance Examination and my rank was not so very wonderful but I got the subject which I wanted and that was Mathematics. I didn't want to do engineering. I wanted to do a five year course in Mathematics. Actually I had a very strange combination of interests. I liked History, Literature and Maths and who was going to give me this "ridiculous" combination (*laughs*). (So) unfortunately normally at that age you were pushed into Science if you were good enough at it. Of course...history and literature held me in good stead later on but then I got into mathematics at IIT Kanpur. From '79 to '84 my student life was in IIT Kanpur and home was in JNU so that was the kind of atmosphere [I had].

RD: You would come home to Krishna during holidays in the five years you were away?

SB: I was in IIT Kanpur

RD: That was also a period of great political turmoil?

SB: Exactly. IIT Kanpur also shaped up many things in [my] life. One thing that I was made to face [was that] it was quite a struggle for women in IIT.

RD: How many of you were there?

SB: Oh! We were (supposed) [considered] to be a very big batch...we were eight girls among 250 boys and we were a big batch!!

RD: And that also with Mathematics?

SB: No...that was the entire class. The '79 batch and we were a big batch of eight girls (and) normally there would be [only] one or two. And, my goodness, I mean that was really a mystery because women were in a minority there and (they were) actually our experiences as women in IIT Kanpur were really bad. [You] see all these students who used to come to IIT Kanpur would be really sort of "the cream" and so on and then they are thrown and they become a drop in the ocean and they suffer a severe identity crisis. They all sort of compete and compete...

RD: Each one is a star...

SB: That's right. Fortunately the girls hostel in IIT Kanpur was different because we had a whole mix, because [there was] not only one particular class, we had PhDs with us, we hardly had any ragging, [there was] a very friendly atmosphere and most of the time the seniors would be helping us out. It was all very nice.

RD: Most of the girls, what kind of subjects they would take?

SB: They were there in engineering, in Electrical Engineering. The tendency was, I mean not to go towards Mechanical or Civil. They would be more in Electronics, Computers, etc. etc. in the PhD level also. And that is the tragedy because they used to do very well. But if

you did well then it was because they were favoured for being a girl, if you did badly, then [it was] because you were a girl, so you are dumb. So you never get very much credit (*laughs*)

RD: No-win situation...

SB: Ya, no-win situation. And in the first two years the boys would be fairly mean. It was a very unhealthy sex ratio. You got all kinds of unwanted attention. The air would be taken out of your bicycle tyre. You would get all sorts of messages, fortunately there were no mobiles then... some [message] stuck onto your bicycle...the girls hostel was very far away as you can well imagine, the libraries used to be open all night during examination periods but it was difficult still for us to go. In fact I was once assaulted on the way and rather than being supported, I was told that "you should not have gone out". The usual macho culture was very much there.

RD: So it must have been quite different from your JNU atmosphere?

SB: Absolutely, very different and in fact I resented it quite a bit. But I will tell you an interesting incident which happened then (*laughs*). Actually it was a strange dichotomy in IIT Kanpur. After the second or third year normally the girls would all pair up with somebody or the other. And then the campus was very liberal...when everybody knew they were going around then ... people would left them alone. Once I remember there was an incident. There were two year M.Sc. students - those who had completed their B.Sc. and would come for a two year M.Sc. Most of them came from colleges so they were used to very ordinary mixing around. So once I remember two girls who had come, they were in M.Sc. Chemistry or Physics and they had gone to the boys hostel nearby and they were just watching the boys play tennis or badminton or something like that. And suddenly they saw that on one of the parapets, boys were parading in their underwear just to embarrass them. These girls came back very angry and in tears and at that time we were having a general body meeting going on in the girls' hostel. And then we did something very unusual because normally girls would say just tolerate all this. We used to be told...*yaar chhod do* (just leave it) *aise hi karte hain, ladke hain* (boys will be boys). We all marched out of hostel. We were some 40-50 of us. And we said, ok these guys are very keen on showing themselves so let them come out here and apologize. You should have seen how the entire IIT Kanpur closed ranks against this "assault by the women". The Rector came down and said, no no no come on. The boys were locked into their room and we knew they were inside but we were told that they were not to be found. There was no apology forthcoming. In fact we were asked, what is this way of behavior? We said we are just demanding an apology that's all. So then they said ok, ok we will have an enquiry. And when those girls were called to testify, the Rector told them, see you must get used to all this. When you go on in life you have to experience all this.

RD: So women have to adjust.

SB: Yes, I mean this was IIT Kanpur in '82 or '83. . And the other interesting thing which we would see in IIT Kanpur was when the cultural festival would come [around], then you would have girls invited from Lady Shriram, Miranda and this and that, and they would all come to Kanpur, and be dressed to kill and all that. We people used to say...ah! all these

brainless beauties and we would go around in our dowdy *chappals* and you know, *phata hua* jeans (torn jeans) and we would find our classmates, the boys borrowing ties and arranging for pocket money to take them out to dinner and we thought all this very stupid. We had a smug attitude towards these girls, because they were not appreciating our struggle. Many a times there were skits [in the festival making fun of us] (against us) so it was an uphill task to hold your own.

RD: Socially and culturally you were confronting these issues which I think in JNU was a much more congenial atmosphere.

SB: Yes, absolutely.

RD: Politically were you affected? In IIT?

SB: Ya. Because as I said, I was the member of one minority, being a woman. I was the member of another minority [of leftists], we were called 'Commies'. Some of the students who were leftists on the campus, would have a students study circle and go to the villages. There was a police firing in Unnao I remember. We went for a fact finding for that. Once later on I had volunteered to be one of the counselors who helped the fresher students. I found that no students were allocated to me because apparently they said, oh, she is from a leftist background.

So you know, it was very American...IIT Kanpur was very American and it had all the American prejudices including an anti Communist one. But interestingly, when we came there we found that...though that was actually the fag end but just like in Presidency or JNU, during the Naxalite Movement period...there had been students in IIT Kanpur also who had been sympathetic with Naxalite ideology and even till that day on the top of the water *tankee* (tank) "political power flows from the barrel of the gun" was written in some indelible chemical which nothing could be done about. So obviously some students did think on all those lines. In fact apparently it was those students who began the Students' Senate there. There was no democratic set up otherwise for [student] election [before that]. But the Students' Senate and also the *karmachari* union was begun by...students having that kind of leaning. And by the time we came in '79, that batch had more or less passed out.

RD: In IIT Kanpur you were already introduced to very Left politics...whether from Krishna or your JNU surroundings. So when you came to IIT was there any kind of fresh...

SB: Ya...because you see I think in JNU we were too young. I think it was more a Socialist kind of understanding. My mother was not belonging to CPM or CPI or any political party. She was in childhood influenced by the Socialist movement. She belonged close to Goa...Karwar. In JNU I think we just breathed SFI and AISF, I mean we didn't think very much about it. We were not old enough also at that time. When I came to Kanpur and I traveled in the rural areas of Kanpur...

RD: How did that happen?

SB: There were two occasions. That's why I said IIT Kanpur was a strange place, because though it was very elitist, very American, most of my batch went abroad, lot of my batch joined as managers, corporate managers, many of them have joined IIMs and so on, but...the same IIT Kanpur voted a Gandhian to be the President of the Senate, somebody called Ganesh Bagadia . He used to wear *kharaus* (wooden slippers), he used to study Nuclear Physics, but he used to wear *kharaus* (laughs) and he was, you know, wearing *dhoti* and *kurta*, and he broke all rules to say that I will not have dinner with the Vice Chancellor, I will invite the Vice Chancellor to have dinner in the mess. So we had very good mess dinner, you could imagine!! (laughs). So there was also this kind of space there. I joined the NSS – National Service Scheme, as part of our [work] we used to go and teach in the rural area. You joined the NSS or NCC or something or the other. So I joined NSS and I was very keen on teaching. Actually my whole dream was that I would teach. And that was the first time, I remember that we were very naïve and we went in [a village] and started a school. And initially we went to the *sarpanch's* house and we said ok, we will have our classes here. And we were very surprised that *nala ke us taraf se* (from the other side of the *nala*) why weren't those children coming here?

We were so naïve that we could not understand that there was something called caste. And I think that was my first time I came across caste because being in JNU, and before that being in England, caste had not sunk into me at all. But this is the time when I realized that, my god, these children who really needed the school are not coming. So then we said we would have our class on the other side of the *nala* which seemed to me logical if they were not coming and they needed it more. We were boycotted by the village, complaints were sent about us. Then we realized that this is what rural India is like. This is caste. We were getting educated about all those things. We had a group of students there and we used to discuss....we also planned to have some activities. I was very close to the mess workers there. They had a cultural group and that's where I learnt a lot of Bhojpuri songs and it was a very nice team. There was a beautiful play that they used to perform a play on the police firing which had taken place on the workers of Swadeshi mills. If you remember [it was] almost like Jalianwalabagh, workers were inside and there was a firing....

RD: Shocking incident. Many workers were killed.

SB: Shocking incident. So the workers used to do a play. I participated. Actually several batches before us, the students who had been there, had designed that cultural programme. But I still remember [those mess workers] Shubhkaran, Ramasheesh – all of them must be retired long ago now.

RD: You were then still in IIT?

SB: I was in IIT. I think politically my coming of age was in 1984, because in '84 if you remember both the events, the Sikh riots and Bhopal, for our generation, were really very big political events.

RD: How did the Sikh riots in Delhi affect you in Kanpur?

SB: Actually you see...my birthday falls on 1st of November, so on 31st of October I was traveling. I was on Kanpur railway station going home to Delhi because Kanpur to Delhi is an overnight journey and that was the time when rumours started... "the Sikhs are

coming...the Sikhs are coming from Punjab and they want to kill us...*laashe bhari hui hain* (dead bodies are lying all over) in the trains of Punjab". So I came back to the hostel. I remember the whole paranoia... the way the people were creating a fear as if Sikhs were going to come and attack the hostel or something like that...whereas actually it was the opposite. Sikhs were burned, Sikhs were killed, they were chopping off their hair and running wherever it was possible and it was actually a very brutal riot. Then I came home [to JNU] and this is where I said my mother was a big influence, because I remember when I came home there was a meeting going on in my house with all the students and they had come there and were gathering clothes etc. for the relief camps.

So actually by '81-82 ..when I used to come home in the holidays [I had related with] a group of students who were in JNU and All India Institute of Medical Sciences, It was a group we had formed and we were a little sick of the student politics going on in JNU campus which had confined itself only to students' movement and [student] elections, but we felt that students must actually go out and interact with the workers. So if you remember '82 was the [year of] Asiad Games and it was just like [the] Commonwealth Games. There were lot of migrant workers coming in from everywhere and just outside JNU, where today you have Priya Cinema and Siddharth Hotel and all that, there was a huge concentration camp literally, camp of migrant labourers, lot of them were from Chhattisgarh also. Of course I didn't have a relation with Chhattisgarh at that time, a lot from Orissa. So we [students] formed a nice team. There were some students of All India Institute, some students of JNU.

RD: There were doctors?

SB: Yes doctors, training to be doctors some of them and students from JNU and people like us who came from Kanpur. So we used to go there to those camps. And I was totally appalled by the conditions there. There was an Oriya boy who used to come with us to talk to them [the workers] because most of them were speaking in Oriya. Normally we used to teach and the doctors [would treat] because there were epidemics going around at that time - gastro enteritis. I remember one day going and talking to one worker and they said how they don't even have any money to go home and were basically in a state of bondage. They had been brought here, they had taken advances and they had to buy ration also from the same contractor and they were in an appalling condition, they wanted to go home but they didn't have a choice. Next day when we went back, that man wasn't there. So this is where [for the] first time it occurred to us that we have to be very responsible. Talking about organizing.

RD: Talking to you he was picked up?

SB: We don't know what happened to him actually. Either he was sent to some other construction site or the contractor transferred him or something and we were very afraid because these people are very blood thirsty, anything could have happened. And then we understood that this is a very responsible work. Organizing workers is not something you can do when you feel like, and can withdraw from when you feel like. Because for them it's a matter of life and death, it's a matter of their employment, it's a matter of their survival. That is the first time I think around '82 that I seriously started thinking about working with workers. At that time we heard about Shankar Guha Neogi because Neogi had been arrested under the National Security Act, NSA and in fact the Birla Textile workers were

participating in a *julus* for his release. I remember, my mother was one of the signatories, at that time along with P.N.Haksar, she and Amit Bhaduri and many others had also signed for his release under the NSA and there were some people who were going around with those signatures. That was the first time we heard about Neogiji and we were lucky...around that time he was released also and then he had come to Delhi and that is the first time we spoke to him. So this entire group of ours got very interested and I think that was '82 and after that we on and off kept up this relation till I finally joined in about '86 Shankar Guha Neogi's movement.

RD: And by that time you had finished your studies?

SB: In '84 I finished at IIT Kanpur. A five-year course – MS in Mathematics. I taught for a little while in the DPS [Delhi Public School]. That was like a factory

RD: And then you taught in school and then in '86 you decided to go to Chhattisgarh?

SB: This is how I got interested.

RD: What did you think you would do there?

SB: Actually that is also very interesting. This was a period when I had a lot of debates with my mother because she was very worried. I think she was totally sympathetic but she always used to ask me, exactly what are you going to do there? She used to tell me, it is very important for you to have an identity, what will you do and you know...you are just going after an idealistic dream. I said whatever the movement requires, I will do it. That's very simple to say that and I am still very glad that I did that...I mean I wouldn't have done anything differently from hindsight.

RD: Tell me a little bit about the movement. Was it major at that time? What was the movement like, which drew people like you and others at that time?

SB: Actually, Shankar Guha Neogi's movement was a trade union movement with a difference. See, Neogiji himself was a proclaimed Marxist Leninist but the kind of mass, the kind of trade union struggle which he created was of a very different kind. It was basically of the miners, contract miners in the captive iron ore mines of the Bhilai Steel Plant and there were some very interesting features about it. One thing was their flag – it was red and green. It was not just a red flag, but a red and green flag. Basically his notion was workers are not victims. The workers are actually the organizers and the workers are the leaders in the society and they being the most cohesive, being the most well organized and being part of the modern production system, they are the ones who are going to organize the peasantry around them, the urban poor around them and really generate a force. His notion of trade unionism was that we don't have an eight hours trade union...we have a twenty-four hours trade union and its not just confined to economic demands. The union had seventeen departments at that time including cultural department, health department, a *bachat vibhaag* (savings department), anti liquor department. So basically the idea was not just economic...it was not just economic struggle, though economic struggle was the first fundamental for survival, but all the aspects of the worker's life —health, education,

culture, relationship with the peasantry, status of the women— everything was going to be part of the working class movement, a holistic movement.

RD: Do you think that this kind of approach or thinking was there in other trade unions?

SB: Oh no. And this is what was very important. And the other thing was that it was a very political mass movement. It was highly democratic. The decisions would be taken through weekly *mukhiya* meetings. And the time we came there...started interacting there, there was a very successful anti liquor movement led by women there. And the interesting thing about the anti liquor movement was it was not a *moral* movement. It was not that, oh no, you should not have *sharaab* because it is immoral!

RD: *Yeh '80s ka baat hain?* (was it during the '80s?)

SB: *Yeh yaha early '80s mein ho chukka tha.* (this had already happened in early 80s) *Jane ke pehle* (before we went) but the effects of this were still visible. The anti liquor movement, let's say the moving force of it, was overwhelmingly the women, who were given the leadership of the movement. So the Mahila Mukti Morcha was spearheading the anti liquor movement but it was very much a political movement in the sense that liquor not only spoils the health but the notion was very clear that actually it is the enemy of organization. If people are going to be drunk all the time then there is no question of their being able to organize. And what the employer gives you with one hand, he is taking away with another.

RD: It was a very popular movement at that time.

SB: Yes. And there was certain strategy for which Neogiji was very responsible because his understanding was that what was happening once the economic movement started, initially amongst great repression. The moment the union started there was a police firing and 11 workers including a woman worker Anusua in 1977. Immediately after that was a police firing. So it began with great repression. But then the union got stronger and stronger. The first thing that happened was economic change. From something like three rupees, wages went upto some several hundred rupees. . But a lot of the men's wages was going in liquor. Now what was happening was there were fights in every family. The women were fighting and they were suffering at the hands of their husbands. There, fortunately, the men and women both went to work. And that was another important reason why women were powerful there. They both went to work as a pair, doing the raising work and the loading work.

RD: All contract workers?

SB: All contract workers. And...so they [the women] also had a say in the earnings and they had a voice. But these fights used to happen privately in the household and women were losing out. So actually Neogiji took the fight out in the open and said, the man can say "who are you to tell me to drink or not, its my money, I will do whatever I want. It's my house so you move out." He can throw you out and so on . He can say it in the house. But when his wife is joining a *julus* and saying "*sharaab pina chhod do, sharaab ki botal phod do*" (stop drinking and break the liquor bottle), then even he has to say, oh ya very good, very good

because he knows that is a social movement! So actually there was a tremendous empowerment of the women, who then could go as a group and call out the husband who was beating up his wife, all the husbands who were drinking up their wages...the wages would be given by the union to his wife. And [the union declared] that he is not capable of handling his wages, so you keep it. In fact the wives and the children would be gleefully dragging the drunken husband to the union office and say “iska paisa humko dila do”.(Give his wages to us). And side by side, the Union started doing very many creative things like having sports, doing cultural activities just to keep people away from drinking. I think there was recognition at that time that the Mahila Mukti Morcha required a separate identity.

RD: How did Mahila Mukti Morcha begin?

SB: See Mahila Mukti Morcha actually began like it usually begins in the trade unions, as a women’s wing. And often what happens is that it is usually adjunct to the main [organization] to support the struggle of the union. Here one thing was that the women were equally powerful [as wage earners]. Secondly they were leaders, pioneers in the anti liquor movement which was a important. In fact around that time, the State Bank of Dalli Rajhara got an award for the maximum number of fixed deposits.

RD: And it came all from the workers?

SB: Yes. It was a mining town. So there was a *bachat vibhaag* (savings department) which used to help workers save. Also, automatically, because they were both working - husband and wife, the number of children would come down. Also you would notice that that generation doesn’t have more than three children. Whereas the earlier generation would be having seven, eleven ...you know. But obviously if you are working, then they would all educate their daughters too.

RD: Why?

SB: Because now they could afford to do so. The husband and wife were earning well, I and the women participated in the production process and she had a say in her house. Now at that time the whole issue of mechanization came up. That is around ’85-86. With mechanization what often happens is that the women’s work force is thrown out. So again there the Mahila Mukti Morcha had a very important role to play. Because it is the women who were going to lose and again a very creative solution was found to that, which was semi mechanization, like you know, really how much cost benefit is it going to give? And it’s interesting that the same classes —the contractors, the shop keepers who were dead against the union initially, when the union started— they all followed, were led by the union and joined the anti mechanization struggle subsequently.

RD: Why did they support it?

SB: Because you see mechanization would involve conveyor belts, the ore would travel by conveyor belt, so you would no longer need truck transportation so all of them were going to be out of work as well. Besides the mining township had [a population of] about one lakh people then so there would be shopkeepers, some 10,000 shops would be surviving on it.

Now what would happen to them if the workers were retrenched? So it was very interesting, it was a real example of united front politics with workers in the leadership. So you had the trading class and the contractors rallying behind the union to fight the Bhilai Steel Plant on the issue of mechanization!

RD: And they were able to rally support...

SB: Yes, they were able to rally support at least at that point of time. It is different that the Bhilai Steel Plant totally stopped recruitment in the '96 or so and today the numbers have dwindled.

RD: So it was mechanized finally?

SB: There also was a Dalli mechanized mine from the beginning, but what they would do is they would say they wouldn't recruit any new people in the manual mining area and they would go on shifting remaining workers and emptying area after area. The area which got emptied out they used mechanization there. We couldn't force them to recruit.

RD: So they were not getting new workers and wherever they were going for mechanization they were getting the trained men there?

SB: Ya, those would be ITI trained people who would run the machine and it would be first of all a smaller number. That was the strategy. This has been discussed quite a bit by Ilinaji (Ilina Sen) [in her writing], also that the crucial issue of women's leadership could not be taken up even though Mahila Mukti Morcha was in existence. One of the reasons of course was that, that generation of workers both men and women were very largely illiterate. And particularly the women were almost *all* illiterate. And I remember... for example, one of the senior woman leaders Leela didi whom I look back upon with great fondness, she has now retired. She was really my teacher there. When I initially went there I was really nervous and I remember she was the person who told me to get up and give a speech. So I said I can't give a speech because my legs are shaking. She said oh come on, don't be stupid (*laughs*), I remember her remarkable courage, the militancy shown by these mining women.

Neogiji had a very good way of creating a forum for people to participate. For example in the conciliation meetings, he never would go alone, he would go with a large group of people and an even larger group would be sitting outside. Any settlement which was to be signed would never be signed by him alone or even by small group of workers. It would always be read out to the entire *mukhiya* group and discussed threadbare and then only signed. And the women used to play a very important role in applying pressure. I remember once there was a strike which had to be elongated a month extra because the union insisted that equal rates must be given to men and women. Now holding out for one extra month is very difficult. And the management had a very diabolical logic, they said the men do lifting work and the women pick it up in the *tokri*, so it's a different nature of work. But he said no, absolutely not they are doing the same work, they are doing it together and they must get equal wages. So you know it's a very clever way of saying that no..no..actually they are unequal. If we have permitted it then the gap would have gone on increasing...

RD: But vision-wise you lose out because this is the politics that proclaims that men and women's work would be...

SB: Would be different, or men's work is more highly valued.

RD: So this is the setting in which you went to Chhattisgarh, what did you do and how did you fit in?

SB: Fit in there? Before that I want to give a small example about Leeladidi. You see at that time there were trade union cooperatives. There was a decision that there will be no more contractors, there will be cooperatives. Now there was a possibility that the union cooperatives might be managed by unscrupulous men, so Neogiji had an idea that the cooperatives must be headed by women, now the difficulty was all the women were illiterate. So Leeladidi described how he insisted that it will only be women and she was elected to be one of the leaders and she said that she was so nervous because the cheques...lakhs of money had to be disbursed, there were accounts and she was terrified, I can't read [she said]. So everyday she used to go to his house early in the morning and say "please release me from this. I can struggle, I can go in and shout slogans, I can fight, I can do everything but I can't do this". Then he would say "No...you have to come into the leadership, you keep somebody who can read, your daughter, your son can help you, so and so in the union can help you, but you must do this". And she said, he would be very persuasive and say, "Ok achha one more week..one more week" and he kept on pushing it, until she became comfortable with the idea. So in a sense you know he used his authority and probably had it not been throwing his entire weight behind the proposal of keeping the women there, he might not have been able to get through with it. Because many people would say oh she's not competent and so on. So when I went there...

RD: You come back to the Mahila Mukti Morcha?

SB: Yes...yes. When I went there basically....I went initially to teach.

RD: That was your dream also...

SB: Yes, my dream also, but actually you see, one great advantage we had at that time was, that there were no NGOs (laughs). So we either had to have a career - a regular career; or you had to just plunge into the people's movement. *Main to shuru mein bachcho ko waha* (initially with the children, I...) I would sort of take extra classes sort of thing for the children who were giving board exams.

RD: You went to Chhattisgarh alone?

SB: No I didn't go alone. I went with another friend, whom I married later, now we are separated.

RD: He also went to teach?

SB: He went to become a health worker. And he also worked in the hospital for a little while and then both of us then moved to the trade union. Initially I remember facing that

problem which my mother said, about not having an identity, that is really very serious. Unless an organization makes up its mind to give its women leaders a level playing field, there will be many things which will be difficult for them to do. Like if I am a trade union leader, a woman trade union leader, and an emergency happened somewhere, I cannot just at 11.30 in the night get a motorcycle and go to the jail. That means somebody is to appreciate this problem of mine. So either I need somebody to help me to do that, or somebody to take me, or somebody to still think that it's important enough for me to go there. So usually what will happen is, somebody else will do the job; it has to be recognized and you have to make up for it, you have to be proactive in ensuring that their participation is not reduced due to that reason. See, a man will pick a motorcycle and go somewhere.

For example this Leeladidi, when we used to go to her house, her husband used to make the tea and this respect which has come from him and the ease with which he could take it and the ease with which the rest of the family did it. I think this would not have happened in the middle class but that space has to be created. So that you know she would talk to you...he would not talk to you...she would talk to you and he would take it in a very easy manner that obviously they have come to talk to her, so I better cook (laughs) or better look after the children or do whatever is to be done. But that space is to be created *naa*.

RD: And other women won't even have, like you said, you have come from a background with so many opportunities and exposures, most women would be even afraid to think that you know, they can go beyond that *laxmanrekha*...

SB: For example, I remember there was another woman leader with us, a very strong lady but whose husband used to really torture her. And I remember we used to go as a group always to drop her home. We would let her go inside the house and we would wait another 10-15 minutes and make sure that there was peace inside before we came away. So sensitivity to this has to be there and then the union has to be involved. Because you see, sometimes there were difficult situations also. A woman cannot be given freedom in parts. If she gets freedom, she gets total freedom. If she starts getting involved in trade union activities, it might be that she would like to break out of the relationship of marriage, it might be very oppressive, she might find somebody else. Now that is a very complicated question for a union to deal with and it almost always happened (*laughs*). Actually it happens with men also, but that is considered as a secondary part of their life, so they don't bother about it. But about the women there will be complaints...see her house has been broken up because of the union activities or may be the husband will come or somebody will come to complain and say don't take her, she is out all night, she goes here and she goes there, How does the union deal with such moral questions when they are posed. Now that is another place where Neogiji was very strict.

RD: How did the union deal with such question?

SB: Ya...actually...I remember there was a young leader of Bhilai who had a oppressive marriage and she did want to break out of it and when she became involved in the union, she was a marvelous leader, it was visible that she was getting along with someone else and she was breaking out. So some of the very really nasty gossip type of other women came to me and said, see that one is doing like this, and see our whole *mahila* organization would get spoiled and our husbands will not allow us to go and all that. So I was really

worried. I could see it happening and I was not clear what to do so I discussed this with Neogiji. So Neogiji said, look here, about that issue you talk to her separately, only to say, that we won't allow this to come in the way of your independence, try to stand on your own feet before you make another relationship the base, but you talk about this privately. As far as our public stand is concerned we are not bothered whether she has three lovers or four boyfriends. And we will continue to project her as a leader, we are not going to project her any less because she is portrayed as immoral. I think that was an important.

RD: What was the private conversation?

SB: Private conversation was to tell her that if you weaken yourself by making this the main issue, then you would be attacked in this way, so why don't you first concentrate on building up your own self, and as it happened it was prophetic. Because if that relationship hadn't become more important she wouldn't have had to run away. She had to leave the movement altogether and later on I heard that that was also an unhappy marriage which was bound to be, bound to be, there is nothing surprising about it (*laughs*). At least here in the movement there was a scope for her to do something else, be something else but she was not able to give priority to it. So initially not having a role was very difficult.

RD: The union must be teetering at that time, not knowing what to do with such people?

SB: You see the thing was that it was a matter of principle, because the union had an understanding that middle class people should submit to the union leadership, which I think in the long run was very good for us. Because for people who came from the middle class we were not looked upon as leaders, we were looked upon as workers like everybody else. And that was important. Because primarily it was the people from working class backgrounds who were going to have the say. The other thing was we lived absolutely like the workers lived so this whole process was actually humbling, and declassing and getting used to living in the working class. Actually it was not very physically difficult. Some parts were horrible, the most difficult thing was to go to the fields (*laughs*) to the toilet in the fields. Particularly, when the pigs are around...so you have to take a stick to whisk away the pigs. So that was a difficult thing. The other difficult thing was something like...you know...suddenly you feel like reading P.G. Wodehouse...

RD: Did you miss any of that?

SB: I missed it for a little bit but not so much a question of material comfort. I think if you come at an early age that is really the least of the problems. You know you adjust with all those [material] things. The more important thing was to make friends.

RD: How old were you?

SB: 86? so twenty five. Half my life I spent there, I am fifty now...I went when I was 25. See the more important thing is to make, being able to make friends. Because you see that is what sustains you. And one thing that I realized very early on, that is something also nice about the union and Mukti Morcha because it was like a family, so you participate in births and deaths and marriages and festivals It is like one big family. So you also get integrated into the life like that. So I made friends.

RD: And your friend who went with you was he a good support at that juncture?

SB: He actually was pushed into, sort of, taking a more leadership sort of role. He was a support but I found it more difficult because there was no carved out niche ready there. There were so many things which he needed to do people had a need for it and he would be asked to do it but many times for example in the office, I would be sitting there I would not be going out so I would just start sweeping the floor or cooking something and then Neogiji would say, no no no no...don't cook, don't cook, don't do this. He didn't want me to be stereotyped in those roles. I would say let me do something at least, I can do something (*laughs*). So I remember once I was getting very crabby and fidgety so I think he realized it and he said, look here, you have come here to work...right? So there is no dearth of work, let me give you some work to do, I remember that was the time when the Bhilai strike just started.

RD: Which year?

SB: That was '91. just before he died actually August '91. He was killed in September. So he said ok *thik hain*, a new [academic] year is starting and the workers have been on strike for one year, the children have to go to school. Normally the union was self-sustaining but for this, the education of the children, a striking workers' children's education fund was created because Neogiji's understanding, which I very much agree with, is what are the things which break a strike - one thing is illnesses, second thing is legal cases and the third thing is when a kid cant go to school. So his understanding was if these three things are taken care of, other things people will somehow manage. He felt very strongly about this. So, he said ok *thik hain* you have to now go around and list out all the children, which classes they are in, how many books we need of which class, what are the uniforms we need and I remember 15th August is the time when in all the government schools, students wear their uniforms, new uniforms and go, so just before 15th August we had to get all ready. So there was a whole *pandal* with sewing machines whirring away and my job was to go and get all the books. I remember I got so engrossed in it and he said, see now, you are not waiting for anybody to come home. Somebody else will be waiting for you to come home (*laughs*). So there was space, he did try to create space. But it was an uphill task because everybody was not equally sensitive like that. In fact many people would be little resentful or they saw my role as very limited, that ok...*thik hain*, if she knows English, translation *kar dijiye*, English to...

RD: But you were wanting to do more than that?

SB: Yes, more than that. But I remember also being very much scolded by him [Neogiji] because I had a tendency to go on doing laborious kinds of work. So he said..see don't only do your work, you also have to think, give yourself time to think... (*laughs*).

RD: So, we were talking about your involvement, the strike and also your work with the children, their education and all, as you rightly said that Neogiji has pointed out that it was one thing which the workers.....

SB: Because it's a question of the future, the next generation would also be in the same [situation]. It's such a different thing than what is said about the attitude to child labour, "look at these insensitive people who send their children off to do child labour", not appreciating at all the lengths to which working class parents would go to actually to try to save their children from this kind of a difficult life.

RD: That was in '91?

SB: Yes. Well actually there was a tougher struggle after that, because these incidents which I am telling you, I am telling you about a movement which was at its peak when Neogiji was alive. And then of course there was a huge repression. Neogiji was assassinated in '91. In '92 there was police firing in which 17 workers were killed in Bhilai. That was after Neogiji was murdered on 28th September 1991, and this was 1st July 1992. So many cases, there were hundreds of workers in jail, the leaders were in jail, the last batch of leaders to come out of jail was 17 months later. So people were in jail for a long time.

RD: What kind of cases on the workers?

SB: Oh...actually you see what had happened in Bhilai was that, the contract workers of sixteen factories belonging to five different industrial groups had just come out and basically they got organized, and were demanding things for which you really did not need to have a demand charter at all. Eight hours of work, minimum wages, wage slip and attendance card, medical facilities, leave, everything which is already in the law from 1948 onwards. But the fact of them getting organized in those private industries of Bhilai [was intolerable]. Look at the ferocity of the attack, whereas Neogiji had been organizing in the public sector from 1977 to say 1989.

RD: Was he a worker himself?

SB: Yes, he was a worker. He actually began as a worker in the Bhilai Steel Plant in the early '70s, or late '60s. Actually he was thrown out because he led the one and only strike in Bhilai Steel Plant. There was no strike ever since. And after that ...that was the period post the Naxalite Movement also, it's interesting that though he did go to a large extent along with Marxist Leninist thinking but he had a major difference at that time on the issue of mass movements and mass organizations. He did not agree that all mass movements and mass organizations are revisionist. He stood firmly on this, this is very important. And then he basically was thrown out of his job. He roamed around the whole of Chhattisgarh selling goats and selling cloth, and fishing, and settling down here and there, and then finally he settled down in the Danitola contract mine, where he worked, first as a worker and then as a *munshi*. He also married his wife, a tribal lady Asha Neogi over there. And he was put in jail in the Emergency and when he came out in '77 that was exactly the time when the CMSS [Chhattisgarh Mines Shramik Sangh] was forming and he was called by the workers...

RD: So it was not that he initiated...

SB: No... he didn't initiate the struggle which gave birth to CMSS. Of course that name and that union was registered after his coming. There was a huge strike. The workers had spontaneously moved out of the INTUC and AITUC unions. And this they had done was

because of the discrimination between the permanent workers and contract workers. Their struggle was for something very minimal like bamboo sticks to repair their houses before the monsoon rain. [The old union leaders told them], “*bonus wonus ka kuch sawal hi nahi* (there was no question of bonus) *yeh tha ki* (it was like) when an elephant will have five legs then you will get your bonus”. So in fact when they got their bonus, they took out a *julus* with an elephant with five legs (*laughs*). So basically it was a revolt, a revolt from below of the contract workers from the official trade union and they formed this new trade union. And they got this young and very honest trade union leader from Danitola, which was not very far away, to come and lead them. And that was how he [Neogi] started [CMSS].

RD: So to come back to '91 and to see your trajectory, then from there how did you go on?

SB: Actually until the Bhilai movement started, I was doing odd work in the union office, helping out and so on. When the Bhilai movement started, around '89-90 or so, we had already shifted to Bhilai and in Bhilai I had a more active role.

RD: Where were you earlier?

SB: Dalli Rajhara. Actually the Bhilai movement was really like a storm, I mean with thousands of workers coming to join the union. Four thousand workers, more than four thousand workers, were thrown out of work. So there was a huge strike and that went on. The employers refused to negotiate and they murdered Neogiji and this huge strike was going on. You can just imagine four thousand people and their families camping in the open. A round of negotiation happened but they reneged on the negotiation, and then people sat on the railway tracks and there was police firing. So in all that period we were getting involved.

And I remember one thing...see in my earlier days I used to wear shirt and pants in IIT. And I switched to *salwar kurta* when I thought *ki nahi nahi* (no, no) I have to go and work with the people so I must wear *salwar kurta*. And I remember that day when the police firing took place, and I was rushing around to the hospitals and *thanas* and here and there, I was such a visible [recognisable] character because I was so different just because I was wearing *salwar kurta*. That was the day I first wore a sari and after that I have never gone back. So basically we had to learn to cope with all these things. Rushing round to the hospital, dealing with the kids that was also my first experience of dealing with the legal system, because being an educated person I had to handle all those cases, going to the lawyers and finally my comrades told me that look you take such a lot of trouble and try to brief those lawyers, and then they get corrupted and get retained by the other side, so why don't you just become a lawyer and it will be useful for us. So at the age of forty I became a lawyer later, much later in 2000.

RD: You started studying law?

SB: Ya that was when I adopted my daughter and I had to be at home for a little bit. So this is the period when I just finished off with my law [studies].

RD: Were you a single mother when you adopted her?

SB: No, not at that time. I have been separated from my husband for five years.

RD: He is not the person who came with you?

SB: Yes, yes he is the person. I was married once before that also. I have been married twice actually.

RD: That was divorce and then you married another comrade, and he was also a union worker?

SB: Ya...we went together from Delhi to Dalli Rajhara, now we have been separated for five years. But fortunately, very interestingly there has not been ugliness or bitterness in either of the separations, and fundamentally what I have noticed is that my main reason has been less personal and always more political. For these choices, life choices basically which decided how that went.

RD: How did you manage? Usually separation and divorce end up with lot of bitterness. And you yourself as a lawyer started with saying retribution *bahut hota hain*.

SB: I don't know whether it is a wrong generalization I think it's because of "walking on two legs" and both are important. You have to work on both the legs - love and work. What I found in both the relationships were the differences which were there. Personally, both these men were exceptionally nice people as compared to people outside, both of them were political and obviously had greater sensitivity, but still those difficulties remain, the division of labour, whether it is the attitudes to things, whether it is the way other people take you, so those things are bound to remain. And in both cases I used to fight all the time. In the first case I think I was much younger and little more subdued, in the second case I used to be fighting all the time. I think what kept us together was the larger picture and I think that's very important. That if it is only the relationship, then it will be very difficult for any relationship to survive; and I think it is also the fact that your companion is walking on the same road which is very important. And if there is an understanding in that, I would find a lot of commonalities, even though there would be fierce fights on silly personal things. Not silly, it is actually an assertion, on how to bring up the child and so many things. There would be so many of differences (laughs) which I think are bound to be, but on many things, because you have chosen a way of life together, If there's a difference in that then I would find it difficult to sustain.

RD: But do you think that politically somehow you have a lot of respect for your partner?

SB: Yes

RD: So with that you could not overcome the personal obstacles in every relationship?

SB: No, that's what I am saying. The overcoming was because you had something which you shared as a common vision, but the struggle is part of the relationship, and how sensitively and also dignifiedly you are carrying out the struggle. One cannot wish away the struggle, the struggle is going to be there, I am sorry. You know, the whole issue of division of labour, who is going to cook and who is going to tidy up the house, and whose duty is in looking after a child, and particularly more so in a context where there is social movement,

there is expectation, huge expectations and pressure from the outside, so many other things. So I think that struggle is a part of the relationship. That cannot be done away with. It is solely the question of how you conduct this struggle. And as long it doesn't become so bad [that] you can't see the other persons point of view at all, and become very acrimonious.

RD: Was it tough bringing up a child?

SB: Actually my daughter whom we adopted, it wasn't single handed, but it has been tough being a mother who is always out and not just a ten to four or Monday to Friday working mother, naa? It's twenty four hours and three sixty five days working mother. Many things which I would have liked to do if I had much more time, I would have liked to spend with my daughter, not being able to do it. And many times I do suffer feelings of guilt, very strong feelings of guilt and that is a time I think about my mother. I think about her and say, ok, even I used to crib like my daughter is cribbing today, but today in hindsight I think she gave me more than she took away from me. I mean if she was a regular mother, who was always there, you know *garam garam dal bhaat*, I would not have been what I am today.

RD: How did Krishna take to your growing and also your break up with your partners?

SB: She was very concerned. She told me many times that living alone is a very tough thing and you have to think about it very carefully, she was always concerned. And I think one time before either of these marriages I was also deeply involved with somebody for a little bit and what used to hurt her was that it was not shared and it came from some third person that was very difficult. But see there are times when it's very difficult to share, and I think we need to be given a little bit space to commit some mistakes also (laughs). But ya she was very worried about it. The beautiful thing is, right in the end, she actually accepted my doing all this. She was in her last days when she was ill, and we had a very strange relationship. Because you see she used to feel very strongly that I need an identity and I was a very capable person intellectually and otherwise. She was quite concerned, "is she making best use of her talent, maybe she will regret it later, then it will be too late" and all that. That is also the time when she felt very ill. I was very resentful, because then when she would tell me all these things, I would feel, "look here, if you want me to stay with you, why don't you simply say 'stay with me'. Make a demand on me that you stay with me and don't give all the rubbish about 'you know you must have an identity, then you must do this, you must do that'" So I interpreted it as basically her justification of her wanting to keep me with her. Which was unfair on my part. I mean it did come like a pressure of that nature, and you see in the last stage she had a brain tumour, she was very ill, and in fact the day Neogiji was murdered, I happened to be in Delhi that day. I had come away because she had an operation. In fact I lost Neogiji and my mother within a few months 28th September 1991 and 8th March 1992, so it was like losing your father and mother - everybody at the same time. So she was very ill that day and I got the phone at six o'clock in the morning, "He has been killed". I was just shattered. So I immediately called some friends of mine and was discussing with them in the next room. She called me, she said what has happened? I said this has happened. She said then you must go, immediately.

She could hardly see then, because the tumour was pressing on her optic nerve and we didn't know about it, so she couldn't see and we were getting her eyes checked. And it was no help getting her eyes checked. See, it was very strange. She had an operation and when

the operation was over the doctor called me to say that I have some bad news to give you. So I thought he wanted to say [there was] malignancy. He said, "What we have removed that has no tumour in it". I said "What does that mean?" He said "either the tumour was not there or it was not a tumour at all, it may be some dead tissue, some infection or something". But it was a tumour and the tumour was still there. Though I don't regret it because if he had dug around too much then probably she would have been a vegetable, so maybe it was for the best. So I said, "how can I leave you in this condition", so she said "see what is the point of you not going there now. If you are with them then you must be with them in this time of crisis."

RD: Then she heard about Neogiji....

SB: Yes. So I went. And in fact I just came back maybe in February and she passed away in March. And at that time she had started to understand because that was just the time of Liberalization [policies] and she used to watch Manmohan Singh and say, "What is this happening, what are they doing"? And then one day she told me that "maybe you people are right. What can we do? We can only write but nobody listens to us but maybe you are doing the right thing. It's only on the ground that people can struggle it, fight it." Then one day I remember, she was sitting at home, I was getting ready to go somewhere. So she said where are you going? I said PUDR [People's Union for Democratic Rights] is having [observing] ten years of PUDR, so I am going for the meeting. So she said "Can anybody go to the meeting"? I said "ya, sure" so...she said, "can I also go"? I said "of course, they will be so happy to see you." So I got an auto and of course she went and Randhir Singh and Manoranjan Mohanty and all the people she knew were there and they said *arre* Krishna, after so many years you are coming back to all these things, you had become an academic! Then she came back and said "I think you are right, you have taken the right choice". So I am happy that at the end she had accepted it.

RD: There was some kind of a closure?

SB: Actually our role was almost reversed. She was like my daughter and I was like her mother at the end (laughs) because I had to look after her. In that period again it was very difficult because she was so well entrenched in her own life I couldn't dislocate her but I couldn't have carried on my life from Delhi, I wanted to go to Bhilai. If there was an option of maybe having a place in Bhilai then where would she make friends be, how would she manage, she was too independent so it was you know, a difficult thing for me. But I am happy that at the end she accepted it. Similarly, I think that at the moment with my daughter and I are going through a very difficult phase, she is 15, you can imagine. Tough time. I basically feel that she has to make her own choices. I feel that its unfortunate she is been studying in government schools all through because we live on union budget. Besides it's a culture in our union, all the *karyakartas* live in the similar way. But for her, she doesn't have the normal kind of family, normal kind of this so sometimes I do feel the least she could get is more time. But well it is difficult...not very possible.

RD: When you say that you finished doing law by 2000, were you less involved in teaching and more involved in workers' movement?.

SB: See actually my role has been shifting. Initially from being a sort of odd job person to when I came to Bhilai, then I became more integrated into the Bhilai movement and there

was a lot of organizational work. One thing I must say that a lot of it was of actually organizing the women, both workers and wives in Bhilai, and there was a difference between the way it was in Dalli Rajhara, where there was actually a larger number of working women but who came from much more traditional backgrounds and also illiterate backgrounds. Here, for example there was one factory, Kedia Distilleries, where there were a lot of work, women working, so that meant into the trade union, there was an influx of women. So working with them was one of the important things which I did in that phase.

RD: So you were an organizer?

SB: Ya, ya. So, basically it was important to try to get some of these women into the leadership of the unions. See its one thing if you have a front of women but the basic decisions has to be taken by the trade union. It's another thing for the Mahila Mukti Morcha and those women who were also women trade unionists to be part of the leadership overall. And I think in that sense, my being there and not being there was important. Because if I was not there, then probably there would not have been equal sensitivity to involving those women.

RD: So how did you go about?

SB: See, initially when any worker come into the movement, basically they come with economic demands but as the struggle goes on, there is a certain number of them who go beyond that, as organizers, as people who think beyond . Many of them are, usually most of them are thrown out of work, the leaders, because they are supposed to be the trouble makers so they are already out of the job. But then they become committed to the whole idea of organizing, so they become whole timers like we became whole timers.

RD: But if they give up their jobs how do they sustain themselves?

SB: Usually in these kinds of families more than one person would be working in the family. The whole timers in Bhilai were basically, not really given any salary or anything like that. In fact very minimal allowance, hardly a subsistence kind of amount. But what we used to do is to provide rice, so one thing is rice, second thing is take care of their legal cases etc., third thing is education, children getting their books and notebooks and all that every year, that is one thing that the union takes responsibility for. And all other trouble which crop up. You get a huge *bijli* bill, your *bijli* is going to be cut, then may be the union helps you out. So many of our comrades got very serious operations done. Like one person had to have a kidney removed, another person had a bypass surgery, even that the union supports, and we supported with the help of doctors etc who are also helping us and who are known to the union. Even if a person is working all their life they might not be able to get a bypass surgery done, but many of our *karyakartas*, they have been able to get it done. So basically the idea is , you tide over the difficulties but otherwise people just manage. So with those women sitting with them, discussing with them and then going along with them to organize other women, then we started organizing in two ways.

RD: How did you get accepted?

SB: One thing is that I am good at language and I speak the language and I am a friendly person. I could mix very easily and after fifteen years , twenty years living along with

workers, in the workers' bastis, then you get used to that kind of life. And one thing was, again, some of the things which Neogiji has taught us to be really very close and intimate and looking after the *karyakartas* also and always knowing what are the problems they are facing, whether it's the husbands, whether it's with children's illness, whether it's something else...and particularly you see, issues of the women are very delicate because whether it's a husband who is doubting her fidelity, or a problem you know that the husband is refusing to use contraception and so she is having too many babies, or too many abortions. So actually organizing means you have to get involved in all these things. So you have to have women organizers. I had of course a team with me and then we took up many issues, one of course was the trade union issue, the Kedia Distilleries workers.

RD: So the demands were economic.

SB: Ya, economic demand was they are thrown out of work and all that. But side by side there were two important issues, one was of course of alcohol and *gundagardi* and secondly was of saving the workers' *basti*. You see the problem is these workers are not even paid the minimum wage. So basically their whole existence is illegal. The houses are illegal. They take [hook] electricity from somewhere that is illegal, their entire existence is illegal and they can't help it actually. And then one fine morning you are served a notice and bulldozers come and your whole life's work of setting up one small *jhupri* somewhere has been broken down. So one thing was that the women are the ones who were in the forefront, trying to save these *jhupris*. So one thing which happened was, particularly in Raipur, but both in Bhilai and Raipur, we had organizations. In Raipur particularly we settled one whole *basti* called Mazdoor Nagar which now has something of the order of six hundred to seven hundred houses. It's literally a colony and that is on the piece of land in the middle of the industrial area and all around there are industries so they want to dump their dust there everyday it's an ongoing struggle. But they have struggled and struggled, and got electricity, got water, we run a school there, we run libraries there and the women there have got quite empowered so they also bring their problems with their husbands...

RD: What's this *basti*?

SB: This *basti* is called Mazdoor Nagar, it is in Raipur, and in Bhilai also we are saving various *bastis*. There is one Sanjaynagar where recently, they got a [eviction] notice. Women have been struggling within the union too, you know, women also face certain kinds of resistance. For example if the women have to participate in our structure...One thing I must tell you here, is that, after Neogiji's murder, [over time] in different phases the organization has also disintegrated, it became different groups and our group is called Mazdoor Karyakarta Committee and it has been sort of independent for maybe the last seven, eight years.

RD: Independent from?

SB: *Maane* (means) the Daili Rajhara CMM and this CMM are now separate. And our understanding of that is basically that though Neogiji himself used to think very politically but somehow the politics was not shared with the second rung leadership and the absence of that made various other trends: electoralism, tailing behind the NGOs, or a bureaucratic kind of functioning, started dominating in various different branches. We have tried to make our effort to try to continue to be political. So ours is Mazdoor Karyakarta Committee,

this is active in Bhilai, Raipur and the cement belt of a new district which has now been formed called Balodabazaar. This is where basically cement multinationals have come in. In many of these places there is also movement of the peasants. And in all these areas the women are very active, saving the *bastis* in the anti displacement movement. And getting those kind of women in the leadership of the total movement is a very important aspect. Because women are not economistic, and also women, in the land struggle, usually don't want to give up land. They are not prepared to take compensation because they know what compensation means. Somebody is going to drink it up, or buy one motorcycle, or build one house, or marry off the daughter, finished, its all going to be over. But her idea of land, you know, is being productive, having a place, having a community, this is very precious to her. Like for example women now struggle to save Mazdur Nagar, it is also because they are empowered in Mazdur Nagar. They have a community, they have an organization, I mean if they have a problem with their husband they know where to go to. And in Mazdur Nagar, no husband can tell his wife, get out, and nobody can say that get out of my house.

RD: And it gives them a security...

SB: Ya, ya so being in the movement is very important. And that is just the begining because if you want those women to participate you have to make some special arrangements, you have to take them to the meetings. You must realize the importance of that, give them space to speak. Fortunately in our leading committee for example we are three women , two of them are from working class background and myself, among the 12 total of the leading committee. So we do try, but its not always very easy.

I will give you an example, that once in Bhilai, there was one of the *mukhiyas* and we got a complaint that he used to not treat his wife well. That we had heard about but she herself could not come and she wouldn't talk about it. So it was very difficult to confront that problem. But then he had actually gone to some other women's house, troubled her, harassed her some way and she did complain. Now we decided that we are going to take up this issue. So that worker, that *mukhiya*, because those *mukhiyas* are more or less sort of elected, it's not a very formal election but basically selection of those who are the active persons. And he was very active and he had his group of the loading- unloading workers in the coal belt wagons, very militant fellow, always fighting with the management and that was a very positive part about it but this was very negative, so we said that we will take this up. Now there was a hesitancy on the part of the rest of the leadership because they felt that he might try to lead his group out of the union and that would create a problem and even the women who were there in his group, working in his group, they also said he might do that.. so they were also hesitant but we said we will still take it up. Because how can we take up the issue of harassment and molestation of women by other men, when we are not taking up the issue in our own union, then this is two facedness. It cannot be permitted. So then we had a public meeting in which he was forced to apologize and he apologized and the women spoke against him and all that.

RD: But how is it taken by the other male workers?

SB: Ya, so they privately would agree, but they were hesitant because he might take his group out. Initially he did try to create some problem but then gradually [calmed down]. First of all he tried to boycott the union, then he started coming and reading a newspaper in the corner of the office, and gradually he normalized. But this had to come out as a strong message that "look here we are not going to tolerate ill treatment of women".

Similarly, there was a case in Kedia Distilleries, they have won a reinstatement which the management was challenging, so they were supposed to be paid their last drawn wages [each month]. So they would have to collect their wages at the mill gate, which was usually done in the late evening which sometimes became night by the time they got their wages. Now there was one male *mukhiya* who was handling that, and we came to know that he was doing some small corruption. Like he would give to some people earlier, not give to other people, or he was taking some commission from somebody, this kind of thing. The women brought it up. I said its not enough for you guys to bring it up. Are you willing to do that work, you must show them that we have an alternative to him. Then they said didi if we do it then we have to stay till late at night. I said yes, you can't have it both ways, we must change it and we must take the responsibility then. So they said ok. So they said how will women do it, it will be very difficult for them...*thik hain* two of them will stay, not one, two of them will stay and somebody will drop them by cycle. But they will do it, they will manage it. So then they did. And initially that person tried to create lot of problem, see these women don't know how to calculate properly, they are making so many mistakes, they fight with everybody, they do like this, they do like that. But he cooled down afterwards. So th is a continuous struggle and in the trade union movement it is going to be a continuous struggle because for example, these are women workers, so they come out in struggle but many times what the men will say to us that ..."oh didi you say women are very much...in the forefront but when we go on strike it is our wives who pull us back, they say why are you going on strike, how will we manage this and that". Now, superficially it is true because the men are coming to the meetings and getting enthused when they are in a group, but when they go home they find their wife is grumbling, complaining, the child is sick, so and so has a running nose, the house is leaking, we haven't paid the electricity bill so how do they see their wife? They look upon their wife as a force which is pulling them back. So we said, see there is one way, your wife has to get involved in the union, women have to get involved. And the other thing is you are seeing that she is conservative like this, but you are not seeing the advantages that you have in keeping her in this way, you want to keep her like that. So you must understand the dialectics of that position. So then we brought out a pamphlet and we said *ki* (that) keeping the women in the four confines, four walls of the house, how does it benefit the capitalist class. Let us look at it like that. First thing, half the working class is at home, is not coming out in the street, that a big advantage. Second thing that the whole responsibility of bringing up the next generation feeding them, clothing them, doing everything is thrust on the women whereas it should be the responsibility of the society. That is another big advantage for the capitalist class. They say ok we are giving you this wage, its your business how you handle it. And third thing is you kick the worker and tell him that see here I am the boss, but in your house you are the boss, go kick your wife. So psychologically they are giving you a space where you think you are a big *raja* (king) . Treat your wife as you want, you are the king of the castle and all that rubbish. So they give you some psychological safety valve. And through this system they just ensure that property will just go from one to the other, one to the other, so you are there perpetuating private property. So bring the women out on the street, if they share in your wages, they will also share your struggles. Why will they not share? And with this attitude when we started going around, the women are supporting and then the women are also telling that see didi he is only telling one part that we are saying like this, he is not telling how much of the wage he is drinking up, he is not telling how he treats us, he is not telling that out of that money that should be given for the fees of the child, but he gambled it. He is not telling all those realities. So then you get to the other picture.

RD: And then you have a stake in each other's struggle.

SB: Ya..ya but the biggest challenge we are having now is the next generation. Like we have got the *karyakartas*... *Karyakartas* means those who are the activists of the unions. So we have a structure of committees in the *bastis*, we try to function as democratically as we can make it at different levels. Now the question is their children. Particularly the girls. Now the girls say that we want to get married of our own choice, now the issue of caste comes up, the issue of dowry comes up. The issue of, you know, all these things are coming up. So many times we see this contradiction of trade union consciousness, they fight against the employer but will it extend to their allowing their daughter to marry from her choice? And until we go that far, are we going to be able to liberate the women?

RD: So these conflicts will come up?

SB: It is an experiment, two or three young daughters of our women activists as well as men activists have married from their own choice against the caste it has been an uphill task every time.

RD: Against the parents' wishes?

SB: Initially, but there the union has been proactive supporting.

RD: These are slow steps but very important steps.

SB: Ya...so lets see (laughs)

RD: So, do you now function in the union as an organizer or as a lawyer? I am not trying to straight jacket you, I am just trying to understand.

SB: No, I understand. There was a period when I was basically an organizer in Mazdoor Karyakarta Committee. In this whole scenario of Chhattisgarh, we are not only fighting the corporates as workers, because we are in the Holcim- Lafarge cement Multinationals and we are fighting. But actually the biggest struggle against the corporates is by the peasantry and by the *Adivasis*, particularly where the land is being grabbed for the factories and mines and there again there's a struggle.

RD: Where is the conflict with the workers then?

SB: See, we actually are uniting with the peasants there, because even if the land is taken, they are supposed to be getting permanent jobs. But most of the time they don't get the jobs, they don't even get contract jobs.

RD: As we have seen in Singur, there was a conflict between the workers, some workers.

SB: Not in our case

RD: And the farmers who did not want to sell out thinking *arre humko naukri milega...*(oh, we will get jobs)

SB: I understand. No, no there are two things, two situations. One is we are working in a different area and in some other area there is an anti displacement movement, one thing which Neogiji has taught us is solidarity. So, we are in solidarity with almost all, we are part of a larger organization called Chhattisgarh Bachao Andolan., which has all the different people's movements - Adivasi Mahasabha, which is active in Dantewada, it is close to the CPI, Chhattisgarh Bisthapan Virodhi Manch, the Jashpur Zameen Bachao Sangharsh Committee. Similarly, you know, Raigarh, Jashpur, Balodabazaar many places. Our understanding is...this is another thing which goes back to Neogiji. His understanding was that there are two big motors of change - class struggle and nationality struggle, that was his understanding. So one is the class struggle which everyday we are fighting, the workers and the employer. The other is the whole nationality struggle. And he felt that the nationality struggle must be led by the working class. If it is led by the middle class. Then it becomes like Shiv Sena, it becomes chauvinist. It says *..chalo bhagao, non Marathi ko bhagao* (chase away the non Marathi) but when it is in the leadership of working class then its different. Because, for example in the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha, the 17 workers who were martyred in 1st July '92, out of them there was Ashim Das from Bengal, there was Pradip Kutty from Kerala, there was Keshav Gupta from Uttar Pradesh, there was Lallan Chowdhry from Bihar...all of them were very much part of Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha and they were struggling for a better Chhattisgarh. So how are they not Chhattisgarhi? So our definition of Chhattisgarhi is anybody who toils here and sacrifices for the sake of Chhattisgarh, he is a Chhattisgarhi. So the understanding is that, it is a resource rich state but the resources are not being used for the people. And that only can be when the working class is in the leadership of a movement for a better true development of Chhattisgarh. Development does not mean you know, you just loot like this, without thinking of the future generation, or the environment, or equity, but that you consider all those things and you distribute it properly, you look at the people's needs. That is development. So because of this understanding, always solidarity has been very important for us. And anything which happens in any corner of Chhattisgarh we will always express solidarity. And now we have got a very close relation with the Chhattisgarh Bachao Andolan.

RD: Kind of a network.

SB: Ya. So we consider that our responsibility also. So now what has happened is because our Mazdoor Karyakarta Committee has trade union activity in the *bastis* but it also has a lot of solidarity work. Now I am the General Secretary of the PUCL Chhattisgarh, so that is an additional responsibility.

After becoming a lawyer, I realized that its not only the workers' cases but the cases of the farmers- land acquisition is taking place. Community forests rights, cases of *Adivasis*, cases of Public Interest Litigation, environmental cases there is nobody to do that. So now we have set up a group called Janhit, we have brought a number of lawyers together we don't believe in individual legal aid, we do group legal aid, basically for village communities, for people's organizations, even NGOs and all. Now I have the other responsibilities of Janhit and PUCL. So within the Mazdur Karyakarta Committee, I am more or less relieved from the day to day organizing of the trade union etc. I am more into this, trying to develop a broader democratic movement.

RD: So now you have shifted to...after all you have X amount of energy so you would like to focus now more on the larger solidarity and networking and also in Janhit?

SB: Yes...yes, and on Janhit. So now I am at Bilaspur.

RD: Janhit would be more legally focused on cases, not only of your union?

SB: No, no..no, not at all. Of all unions, of various communities who are fighting acquisition, forests rights cases, Habeas Corpus cases, human rights cases so it's a variety of cases we are doing.

I: There has been a NGOisation of various struggles and movements, how did it affect you?

SB: It affects in various ways. See one thing is that the NGOs basically are project based. But for example if we run a union, basically we respond to a felt need of people. People come and say this is our problem, please solve it. So, we are accountable to them and they ask us for something. So it's immediately a felt need, number one. Number two, if it is their felt need they are also responsible for it. They also organize the resources. We are dependent on them only for the resources. Today in our union only some amount, may be not even one third, let us say, people make some donations, some of my friends and so on and so forth. But that's a very small amount. Most of it, the bulk of it is from the workers themselves. So if you are irrelevant for them they will not make any donation, contribution to you. So we are accountable every minute. And we have to take their understanding from where they are to where we wish to take it. If I am an NGO interested in climate change, I go and set up an office because I have got the fund to do it. But are the people there interested in climate change? How do they look at it? From where are they beginning? And how are they going to get there? So that is one problem. Second problem is the project might change from time to time. There is also a great depoliticization of the way you frame the problem. Then it does two very bad things. I mean this is apart from the whole thing of it being apolitical kind of visualization of the problem according to some project. One is what happens to the middle class people who join the NGO, and what happens to the local activists who join the NGO. The middle class people are given the feeling that they can be progressive without compromising their lifestyle, so they don't go through the route which people like us went, which is to actually declass yourself, go live in the *bastis*, became friendly with people. And start treating them as we are friends. So you take a midway path that's harmful. The second thing is even worse

RD: But isn't that true for any profession?

SB: It is true for a profession but at least a profession does not pretend to be otherwise than a profession. Here one has the pretentiousness also, naa? And then you become a really top heavy leader but you are not accountable to anybody else and there is a silent and invisible leadership actually at the back which is not even known many times to the local people. But even worse than that, even that is forgivable because ok, *thik hain* not everybody could manage to declass and all that but still we need people's help. The worst thing that they do is to pluck out the best element from the community and co-opt them into the NGO. Now that is a real loss for the community, a real real loss. Because those

people start working on salary, Monday to Friday, ten to four. Their understanding of what their duty is, who they are accountable to, whose order they are going to take, and after that it becomes impossible for them to work voluntarily.

RC: The whole ethos changes, that's what we see in the urban areas, for any meeting which is between ten to four, that is during their office hours...no meeting can take place after that, and even their bus fare is being taken care of. So if the office does not support it, they don't come to that meeting.

SB: Then it becomes like an employment. Then you become an employee. You are not an activist.

RD: What do you see is this a major barrier in your mobilizing and activism..?

SB: See in the trade union movement there has not been much of an NGO because in the trade union the problems have been different. Because basically the fact that the working class has been very deeply fragmented and the Central Trade Unions are basically among the permanent workers, contract workers are very difficult to organize. Because immediately as you begin organizing, as happened in Neogiji's case, four thousand people were thrown out of job. So its hire and fire. Its very tough to organize, very tough to sustain. So nowadays what we notice is for example, there will be a factory, there will be an accident, a worker falls down from somewhere, there's a spontaneous strike, and they are given two lakh rupees. The movement *patake ki tarah phut ta hain* (bursts like a cracker), its not like a *diya* (lamp) which goes on burning for a long time. For a little time there is something and that's it. And they would remove all the ring leaders, they will throw them out of their work, you cannot sustain an organization. There are also *gunda* attacks...

RD: It was there earlier also?

SB: It was there earlier also, but there are two things. One thing was to some extent a whole jurisprudence had been developed for the working class. It is the only section of the working people which has a developed jurisprudence actually. Well, now as a lawyer I can see very clearly how it has being systematically dismantled. Now you can't hope that the courts are going to help you. Secondly, increasingly the entire administrative apparatus is in the pockets of the corporates. Even earlier the State was not a very good referee between the workers and the employers. Always they were on the employers' side. But now it is more and more blatantly so. Hardly any negotiations are taking place, hardly ever the employers attend the negotiation. Then you are thrown into the court and the court says where is the proof? You might have worked for thirty years and you don't even have a small piece of paper to prove that you were ever employed there. So, where do you go?

RD: So if the main trade unions have almost co-opted by the management, then where do you think the trade union movement ...

SB: See, basically I feel unless the trade union movement becomes political, we are a very small force, but we are surviving because we are fighting. And our strength is not our strength alone. It is like *dahi mein jaman thoda sa ho to pura dahi bhi jam sakta hain* (even a small group of people could make a difference). We are actually trying to help all of us get

together and it is in that consciousness that working class can actually play a very important role. It has certain kind of qualities, organizational skills...

RD: To what extent can law provide us justice in a state that is anti poor, anti tribal, anti women, anti minority?

SB: Ya, true. See, actually we shouldn't look at it as just law, right? There are two kinds of law, one kind of law is the law which we have struggled to create, to represent our aspirations, whether it is labour law, whether forests rights law, whether it is anti amniocentesis law, whether it is anti dowry law, or whatever, we have struggled to create it. It was a response to movements. It was a response to the push which came from below. All these laws you will find are poorly implemented laws, very poorly implemented. And whatever it is, I mean, RTI, they are trying to dilute now, NREGA is violated, there is no guarantee, hardly anywhere the employment allowances are given. But there is another kind of law which is the status quo law, which is to preserve law and order. That is being implemented with a very heavy hand. It is not tolerating anybody falling out of line. You see Binayak Sen's case. On anything which so called amounts to sedition, it comes down heavily; so all movements which are struggling are facing both the kinds of problems. One is to fight for their rights and one is to defend themselves from the attack. Now, the second part you cannot avoid, you are thrown into jail, you have to go for bail. You have to fight the criminal case. The other side, the other which is...where we try to go for rights that is really becoming very disappointing but we must still try to keep the space open. So in fact the workers put it very beautifully to me, they said, "*didi*, this is like a *kabaddi* match, it is actually their *pala*, their area we should go and touch and come, if possible, but we should try not to get stuck over there". See, with this attitude we can try to push the parameters, a little bit, that's all that we can try and do. But on the other side we have to defend our leaders against false cases, people are having so many false cases on them. I mean, every trade union leader will have so many cases.

RD: So you are going to court very often that means everyday?

SB: Ya..nearly. But I don't only go to the High Court, I also go to the District Courts where there are many land acquisition cases. Many times I have to go because the villagers don't even know what is happening on the papers so I will join them, go to the Tehsil court, just to have a look through the papers, explain to them what is happening. I am slowly now having four lawyers with me, some of them are otherwise professional lawyers who give a part of their time, some of them are more interested in this kind of work. Though it is "*khoda pahar nikli chuhiya*" you might do a lot of work and get very little out of it. But it has to be done. .

RD: And that's when you say General Secretary [PUCL] that means after Binayak you are General Secretary

SB: Yes, and after him probably I would be the target also (*laughs*). Yes as you say, we are again in a very Fascist kind of situation, even after the Salwa Judum judgment of the Supreme Court, the attitude taken by Chhattisgarh Government is, they passed an ordinance saying that no, this does not apply to us, notwithstanding any judgment or any order passed by any court, the SPOs are legalized.

RD: Even despite the Supreme Court judgment?

SB: Ya, ya, an ordinance has been passed. Anyway this was an interim order about the legal status of the SPOs, and no order has been passed about the human rights violations documented in the case. There are so many human rights violations and particularly in those very serious situations whenever there are human rights violations, then the situation of women in these areas is highly vulnerable. In fact, for example, I did a case of six rape victims in Konta in Dantewada. I used to go down to the court at Konta, it was a tough job even getting there

In those cases they had tried to lodge FIRs, but they were not lodged. They wrote to the SPs, the SPs did not take it up, then they filed complaints. They attested to the complaints, their family members attested to the complaints, finally the complaints were registered by the magistrate and permanent warrants have been put out for the people who committed the rape and now, the police says that we cannot find those people. So the cases have gone into cold storage, whereas those [accused] people are roaming around and organizing the SPOs, in fact they were a part of the mob who attacked Medha Patkar and all those people who went [on a peace march]. So, this is a difficult task.

RD: When I went there I went to one of the camps but the tragedy is a lot of these people who are kept in those camps were also very unhappy.

SB: Ya, of course. A lot of them have run away [back to the village]. And now what has happened is that it's only the SPOs and their families and some people may be of the same *basti* who are clinging on, because they feel insecure to go back. So I think from the original fifty thousand, [there are only] about ten to twelve thousand remaining now.

RD: Lot of people were saying...and they were scared to speak because the SPOs had escorted me, they wouldn't let me go there alone and later when the SP heard about it, he said, are you mad? You will be the target if you are with the SPOs. You roam around on your own that is the best, never go with the SPOs, because the Naxalites would have thought you are part of the SPO team. Anyway, but the people were saying how can we be happy, we are of the land, jungles...you see the tragedy of the people, people who are being displaced, some have been caught in that conflict, another is the so called SPO camp they are afraid of, some of them are part of the SPO family who might want it, but there is a large section who doesn't want to stay there rather because of the fear of the state they have to remain over there.

SB: See, the areas have become the areas of trafficking. Recently we did a fact finding of rape and murder of one young girl in Sarguja, Meena Khalkho, she was a twelve year old, raped and murdered.

RD: What is the situation now in Dantewada?

SB: Well the army has taken over a lot of land which was protested by some hundreds of elected representatives, and *sarpanches* who came and had given to the Narayanpur Collector a memorandum that we don't want all this here. It is going to create insecurity for

us etc. right now, I think the army has though that area is still supposedly under control. As far as army is concerned, they say that they cannot function unless they have something like AFSPA, something to protect them. Otherwise it is actually difficult to say, the situation is that you still hear of so many ambushes, landmine blastsetc. On the other hand, one of the big stories which is coming out now is this ESSAR affair. Soni Sori and Lingaram Kodopi, who are two *Adivasis*, who are being accused of this, are saying, that this is a false case. At least the case has been questioned...because it was taken up by Tehelka etc. it has come to the forefront but otherwise there must be so many more Soni Soris. Difficult to say. See, actually people are very scared, and the kind of hysteria which has been whipped up in the media. I don't know whether you saw the coverage at the time of Binayak Sen's case, the kind of language being used, Maoist mastermind, and what not...even when somebody like Ram Jethmalani came to argue his case, the Raipur District Bar was organized to show black flags.

Basically people are very scared. If you go to these areas where actually the conflicts are taking place, many people understand what is happening but in the cities where the only information is from the media, that is basically police handouts, their version. I will give you an example, recently PUCL did, I mean Chhattisgarh Bachao Andolan and PUCL together did a fact finding of a village in Jashpur, the village called Harri, which is on the border with Sarguja and Jharkhand, in the news it was said that 400 Naxalites came, and these brave fifty two *jawans* they held them off out there, and how the DGP went the next day and rewarded them and gave them five thousand rupees each and so on and so forth. Actually we came to know that even before that, the villagers had complained. The CRPF people had come from a nearby camp called Astha and when they come in the village, they stay in the school. So they will ask the *sarpanch* to get provisions, etc and organize their meal, and they will eat and stay there. So they had come, got the school unlocked, they came and stayed there and in the night they started firing some rounds. Now that is an area which is notorious for elephants. So normally when the elephants come, people burst fire crackers and come out with torches to scare away the elephants because the elephants do a lot of damage to the crops. So apparently, one *tola* of people came out like that, the CRPF picked up all those people, beat them very badly, made them sit in the *maidan* and they were released the next day. Some of them were beaten up very badly. And so all the people were very angry and they said where are the Naxalites, there is no Naxalite but, because now you are going to get lot of money, because the thana will get money, because you get these promotions, so everybody has a vested interest in saying that the area is Naxalite affected. As I said, in these kinds of situation, women are particularly vulnerable.

I am also part of a network called, Women against Sexual Violence and State Repression, because what we have felt, you see, there has been a change in the women's movement. I mean, if you look at Mathura and even Sati, the women's movement had an understanding what role the state was playing. First of all it did move away from being fronts of political parties to an autonomous women's movement. But after that, now, there is a whole depoliticization of the women's movement. On the one hand it has gained more space and legitimacy, you have got Women's Studies department, you have got self help groups, you have got so many NGOs on different issues and all that. But, there is a whole depoliticization and the way to depoliticize is in the refusal to see the state. And on the other hand we are seeing very sharply, in all the movements, state repression is going hand in hand with sexual violence. We look at the case of Khairlanji case, that attack on *dalits*,

you see, that attack comes along with sexual violence. You look at Tapsi Malik's case, you look at what has happened in Kashmir, Manipur. Of course, so much of communal violence comes with sexual violence like Gujarat, honour killing comes with that. All these conflicts, they are all aligning themselves with patriarchy. The caste conflict, communal conflict, patriarchy reinforces these elements and each reinforce the other. You see what I mean, I don't know whether I am making myself clear. And the state is sort of a bundle of the whole thing. It is really under the state's patronage that Narendra Modi's hindutva groups can murder Muslim women, or upper castes can rape *dalit* women, or security forces can rape *adivasi* women.

SB: What we felt was that we need a kind of front, a forum where many people who are working in different areas but probably feel hesitant to take up those issues from their own platforms, could join. Because if you are an NGO or self help group or, something like that, it might be difficult for you to directly take this up but you cannot ignore the issues which are around you. So may be if something like WSS is there and you could be just a member, then WSS can organize some fact finding, some campaign against AFSPA, some legal help to such victims. This is something which, can let us reclaim politics into the women's movement. So I think that's something very important today. The WSS had a meeting in Manipur. We also had a meeting in Raipur. That was the time when they [WSS members] said they would try to go and meet the rape victims in Dantewada, but they were not allowed to go to Dantewada. Then again on Shopian also, WSS tried to have a campaign. Now we are planning something in Bhubaneswar. Because there various mass movements there, from Posco to Narayanpatna to Niyamgiri and everywhere women have been involved in large numbers and there has also been repression, there have also been many fake encounters of women. On the other hand, the WSS is also very careful and very sensitive to the issue of sexual violence, which surrendered Maoist women are complaining about it, saying that there is such kind of patriarchal sexual violence even in political groups.

RD: How would you go about it in terms of fact finding?

SB: Well, we tried, for example, in the case of Jharkhand, we had been told of women who had complaints like this. We, tried to meet them, tried to form an independent opinion. In one case we found that indeed one woman had been beaten, had been shot in the leg. In another case we found actually there was no truth in the allegation. In the second case we found that the media reports had been misleading and cooked up by the SP. So, whether you accept it or not, women in large numbers are joining these movements and so even within that, the question of how the women are treated, is significant. In Dantewada we so many times we read in the newspapers that the entire ambush is carried out by women. And that means women are joining them in large numbers? One thing is, bringing forward the facts is very important, because particularly in the case of an underground movement, it is very difficult to filter facts from propaganda. The second thing is that at least the theoretical position which has been taken, though as regards Maoist Movement all literature is illegal so there is no way that one can get to know what even is the stand. But recently because of a programme in Anuradha Gandhi's memory some booklets were brought out. I was impressed to see that actually there was a whole campaign which was carried out, which she has prepared, about how to fight patriarchy within that organization. So that I think is a very important thing if indeed that was done. But anyway,

we are more concerned with the issue of how in the conflict areas, the women are being impacted.

RD: I think that the conflict areas are where the women are, you know completely...

SB: I mean, it's shocking, the insensitivity, in Kashmir so many women have protested time and again. Even now, fortunately now a little bit of attention is given to Manipur, after you know the protests after Manorama's rape and killing. But at that the casual manner in which commitments were made even by Prime Minister [about reconsidering AFSPA], were just forgotten. It's very sad. And how many more women will have to suffer before these things are looked into. Now at least people are paying some attention because of Irom Sharmila, last time we went, it was ten years to her fast, so, WSS had participated in that. So basically our understanding is that, women's situation, particularly like...in our trade union, we have an experience of women trying to assert themselves within the movement, but similarly even within the anti displacement movement, within other popular movements, within other organizations, how the particular women's angle or their issues have also to be taken up is crucial. And women must come into the leadership of all the movements. Because one thing which I feel very strongly, "the bread and roses" part, which is that women, not only is it very important to take the women's movement somewhere, but the participation of women in other movements, the anti imperialist movement, in the nationality movement, in the anti displacement movement, in the working class movement they must impact it. Its going to be needed both ways. And I mean...without women's liberation, there's going to be no revolution and without revolution there's not going to be women's liberation! So all of us who are working in different fields, actually I am not really, I cannot really say that I am a women's movement activist, basically a trade union activist and now a human rights lawyer also.

RD: No but you have an important role to play.

SB: I have seen that it's possible, but it's a struggle.

RD: And you can see the link that is very important..

SB: I hope that this should happen, and women's movement should not keep itself away from all these other movements. Sometimes it s difficult like I can imagine the situation of let us say the women of the Middle East where on the one hand there is an anti American, anti imperialist struggle of the people but, it is being led by a very conservative leadership, then where do the women fight, how do they fight back, how do they also fight back imperialism. The questions are complex.

RD: The whole thing is to contextualize the struggle in which context, what struggle, when struggle, *kya struggle ho raha hain*. We cannot contextualize a struggle and that will only depoliticize the struggle. Because as you rightly said that the women's movement has lost that thing and become so depoliticized, I think also when we decontextualize a struggle. That's why I asked you about the NGO, I think one major problem, the NGOisation and the cooption that was one of my questions to you about the trade union movement.

SB: Not in the trade union movement but definitely in other movements. It's also very difficult to sustain, financially as a movement, very difficult.

RD: Would you like to add anything else?

SB: *Bus* (enough)...I think...I can't add more!... (laughs).

Transcription by Somdutta

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