

D. SARASWATHI (born 1963)

Activist, actor, writer, playwright and poet, based in Bangalore.

Interviewed by Laxmi Murthy

[In Kannada]

Laxmi: So let's start Sarsi. I am with Saraswathi, who has been active in Bangalore since almost thirty years, I think. How long has it been in the women's movement, workers movement, dalit movement. So can we go back to the first experience you remember? Whatever experience. Whenever it was.

Sarasi: umm. In between I can use Kannada?

L: You can say the whole interview in Kannada also.

S: My first experience was in 1982. I was in 2nd year BA. Umm Chitra and Savitha are my close friends. They already knew Vimochana. I had gone for an NSS camp and both of them were one year senior to me. In the camp, every evening there used to be discussions. They used to speak with a lot of conviction. Meaning very openly, not like other girls. Like they used to discuss even when there were boys. I liked that very much. We were together for ten days, right? A group of students became very close and among them were Chitra and Savita. And we lived in the same area and were in the same college. And so we became friends and they told me about Vimochana. I had gone to the NSS camp with great difficulty. They (my family) did not want to send me. They would not let me go out and roam around. I had fought and gone. I got to know from them. Then when they used to go for meetings, I went with them. I remember, Mysore bank, there is the law college near by and Donna was studying there. I don't know if it was a correspondence course. She used to always talk to the teachers and get a place to hold Vimochana meetings. We used to sit on a bench there. And I was always more interested in plays and songs, more than philosophy. We used to do street plays and songs. That was my big attraction. And then, everybody was comfortable and everyone was like us. There was nobody talking over my head. It was very homily. So if anybody who was acting had not come, I was the replacement. [Laughs]. And I used to join the singing.

L: Do you remember any songs?

S: What I remember most about those days is that there was an HMT ancillary unit. Important women and rich women, there was even a minister – Leela Devi prasad. They all used to run the ancillary unit for poor women. It was like daily wages labour. They had to assemble the parts. Then suddenly, over night they threw them out. They had given them a place to stay, and they threw them out. I remember that very well. A lot of things happened then. So Amrish wrote a song about it. And based on that song we did street plays. And in the street play, the small parts... I was very

embarrassed to act, to sing, but there was a group singing, and I would also join the singing. [Laughs]. And if someone doing a small role had not come, I was the replacement. I was scared to go far. I had to come home early. I used to go there, and a play had to be performed, and some one had not come, I would join it. That song is very good. It is umm, what is it... [Sings parts of the song, which is about a working woman in a collective] [Pause]. I don't remember.

L: Who wrote the song?

S: Amarish, umm wrote this song.

L: The composition?

S: We ourselves. We did everything, the costumes, the tunes, and the direction. Some men also used to come Shashidhar Haddappa, Sethu Madhava, all these people had done the direction. They were all from Samudaya. They had done the direction. In that I had a small role, a very small role. I had done that. [Sings more of the song]. It is very good. The way he has connects things and connects to their lives. I have the whole song. I used to join in the song. And in the end, like the end in films, it calls for us to unite and struggle. And we used to sit in a group in the end. [Laughs]. That was my first experience. Vimochana was my first love. Though Vimochana was a part of SIEDS, it had autonomy. In fact, if you say SIEDS, people might ask what it was. Vimochana was a collective, not only of women, but also Shramik, that used to work with labourers, there is a film society, there is also something about alternative construction, and many other things. That is Corrine's big dream. It was started with the dream of an ideal society. That was after the Emergency in 77. It was an initiative of Donna and Corrine. They had an office in Cocks town. Because all of it had to work together, a lot of dalit activists used to come there. From DSS, all the Marxists also had a connection to them. From women's movement, I don't know if Vimochana was the first women's group in Karnataka. I think Vimochana is 35 years old. I think it started in 79 or 80. So much so that everything happened to me together. That was my exposure to feminists, Marxists and dalits. But I was most in Vimochana. I was not very active in 82, and after I finished my degree in 83...

L: Which college?

S: M.E.S college. And then, my MA, after finishing my BA, there would have been a talk of my marriage, so I cunningly joined my MA. Then I used to loaf around. There was college in the morning and it would finish by afternoon, by about 1 o'clock. Then I would say college and do only things like this. If there was a street play I would go, if there was a discussion or debate I would go. It was like that in SIEDS, everybody would gather, there was a library. There was a film society; I have worked seriously for the film society. I have done work for two film societies. And the discussions. Like that... it was a homily atmosphere. Corrine was like a godmother. Someone who captured people. Vimochana was bringing out 'Varta Patra' (a magazine). For me it was the plays in Vimochana and the other was Varta Patra. Rajeshwari was editing

the magazine. We thought that maybe we could also write. Raji is the one who introduced me to writing. That was Raji. She used to say 'you talk so well. Write just as you speak and give it to me'. And I felt, could I write as I speak? Like that [laughs], I remember the first time. The first translation I did was Maya Tyagi's case, which was going on at that time. It had come out somewhere and at that time the wish was to understand English. Some of the things that were said in English would go over our heads. We would search the dictionary and look for it. So I had translated from English to Kannada. Then there was a column called 'samvedane'. Here we could write about our personal experiences. I started writing for that. The Varta Patra of Vimochana became a part of our lives. Raising money for it, getting people to write for it, writing for it. Rajeshwari took the entire responsibility for it. She was running it. And connected to that she would call meetings. It was outside, we didn't meet in SIEDS office, it was in the law college. When Donna finished, the place was lost. We used to meet somewhere else, er, the old building of students union in Sheshadari road, on Maharani's college road. There we used to meet in an open space. But this play relating to the ancillary unit, I have performed everywhere. We used to go to factories in suburban areas, do the play and raise money. We would all drink tea from that money. Twenty paise and fifty paise tea. If we got more, we would eat idlis. [Laughs] and for me, because I was studying and didn't have a job, Raji and Savitha and all would pay for me. My bus fares, pay for my snacks, get me coffee, [laughs]. And take me with them wherever they went. If it was late umm and I was scared to go home alone, they could come up to my doorstep and drop me and go back. Then Savitha bought a luna (a small two wheeler) and I was permanently behind her. And if there was an uphill, I would get down [laughs] and she would go and I would walk behind. [Laughs] like this all my expenses, small expenses, were looked after by my friends. It could be Raji or Champa and Savitha. It started from there. After that...

L: Didn't they know at home?

S: At home...

L: That all this was happening?

S: There were problems. But those days there was excitement, about the revolution. If we get on to the streets and fight, the revolution will happen tomorrow. If anyone had asked me 'what revolution'. I didn't know. [Laughs] Just like that. But one thing I strongly felt was 'just because I am a woman, why do people look at me like this?'. And after I came to college, things like we are not good looking came into our heads. Till then I was completely unconscious that er, er one should try and look good. I felt that I am a completely beautiful person. I had thought that. My mother made me feel that. But here it was not like that. None of the boys would look at me. I started feeling that I was dark. I was not good looking, my teeth were protruding out, I have a big nose, and all these kinds of things came to my mind. And there were consequences. My sister was good looking so in front of us people would say, 'anybody will marry her, who will marry you? It will be difficult. They may look at your character and marry you'. So I would think 'what is all this?' So to compensate, I would do things. That has

haunted me a lot. At that time I used to think, 'if I have to overcome this, I must do a great thing, I must become a big officer'. My father was very keen that I become an IAS or IPS officer. That was in my mind. I could do social service and I would have authority, right? I felt that if I did not have beauty, this would compensate. And then I felt... when I came here; I felt that the environment was very affectionate. Here nobody was talking about beauty or talking badly. We were able to talk freely. Even if there was a man sitting next to me, in the sense, it was not an atmosphere where people would misunderstand. Umm. That was very [pause], it worked to overcome low self-esteem. Then we had formed a health group. We would talk about our bodies. [Laughs] 'Our Bodies, Ourselves' was like our bible. Even to look at it... I would be embarrassed to bring it home and look at it. I wondered 'am I doing something wrong?' Shyama used to come for that. All of us would sit and talk about our bodies, menstruation and things like that. Er er, we started talking about all that. And then in Vimochana, Raji had a serious dilemma – in Vimochana Varta Patra there were a lot of volunteers. In the cultural group also there were volunteers. We were not taking a salary from SIEDS and we would spend the play money for transport. They should have discussed this in the core group. But Raji raised it first in the core group. She said 'if I have to give a report of some happening, I want to discuss it in my group. There are a lot of volunteers and they work hard and it is not complete. And that is the real democratic process where everyone had a voice. Then the problems started. Then came the question of funding. When that came up, Raji left Vimochana, Champa also left. Manjula was also working very actively in Varta Patra. She also left. But for me, at that time, about funding... whether I really knew anything about politics, I definitely didn't know. I felt that it was very good and I had understood it at an emotional level. I felt that what they were doing was right. But there were a lot of questions too. The discussions that would take place in English, there were rich people, there were beautiful people, there were people who would talk in English, I would feel inside. Something... er, though in a way we were together, what the society has loaded on us, the downtrodden, there were questions. Like some people were very beautiful and some who could speak English. I used to feel do they also live like us, do they eat like us, [laughs] we used to feel like that in our minds. I have written about that in the book that I have written about my personal life. At that time I felt that though Raji left, umm er I had no clarity of whether I should go with Raji or stay in Vimochana. But Vimochana Varta Patra was running well. That it will stop...

L: Was it a monthly?

S: It was a bi monthly. So we felt that if Raji left, we could run it. It not like owning something. Savitha and I planned so that it wouldn't stop. We will get this written by somebody, this we will do and things like that. But firstly we were outsiders, secondly we were new, and now I feel, without political clarity, if we say we will start, naturally it is difficult to find support. But personally, one ... we felt hurt. Corrine also felt a lot of emotional pain. I feel that the way in which the question was asked was also painful. We didn't get a chance to continue it mainly because Corrine and Donna were hurt. Er, er and then when Raji went out, she continued Varta Patra, and called it Manasa. Champa, Manjula and Raji. At that time Champa had gone to Holland to

study. Both Manjula and Raji decided to bring it out autonomously, with donations from people. And she was continuing that. And here there was discomfort that they were not trusted. And once when I met Raji she casually told me to write something and naturally I agreed. I used to do a lot of drawings and she used them. My journey was with Manasa. It was because of Manasa that I really understood polity and autonomy. Work taught us all that. Working in Manasa helped us understand all that we talk about 'the personal is political, decentralised, non hierarchical, to be democratic how to build a collective. We had no money, we had to raise it from people, and we had rented a small room in Kadugodi. When Champa came back, she came with money that she had saved in Holland. With that we bought a set of letters for printing. Raji had a friend Gita who lived close by and she would set the type. We used to carry that to another place for printing. The entire pasting, posting, the address list, all this was a great process of learning for me. We used to laugh a lot, thinking that we are also making history, [laughs] when we were making the address list. We were the slaves and we were the kings. I liked that very much...

L: At that time was Vimochana Varta Parta also being published?

S: No. Vimochana Varta Parta used to come out occasionally. There was no Kannada crowd over there. Raji, Savitha, Chitra, me were all Kannada people. Chitra stayed back in Vimochana. There was nobody speaking Kannada. Raji used to question 'why should we speak of local issues in this language. Donna and all of them... Kannada was a major issue. And then Manasa, even now it is continuing. Manasa is run by the youngies today. Manasa was a big journey. At that time I started understanding, what things mean. We have discussed many issues like communalism, workers, globalisation, about the environment, about street cleaners. We have brought our many issues on these matters. We have struggled to make it a democratic collective. Rather than say that we succeeded the struggle it self that taught us politics. That. That is a great experience. In 97,98 till 98, Manasa was very much umm, my life. It was such a deep attachment that it was like an extension of my body and soul. I always used to have the receipt book and copies of Manasa in my bag. I never used to go out with out them in my bag for so many years. Every time people saw me they would say 'she has come and is going to download'. We had all shared and each of us had to raise so much money. I have never put that amount from my personal pocket. I would raise it. I would ask some people to give Rs. 10 per month. In and around my house it self I used to raise the money. It could be Indira aunty or Prabha aunty or Savitha's mother; just there I would raise Rs. 300. That was nice. Then life subscription was Rs. 250. [Laughs] I used to think 'ha I got a life' now I need Rs 50 more. [Laughs and claps her hands]. And sitting in the press and looking at the proof and writing. Even in my dreams I had not guessed that I would become a writer. I started writing. I would not show my poetry to anybody. If there were space empty in Manasa, then they would use my small poems as fillers. Raji used to say 'write, please write, you write so well'. The first credit goes to H.S Rajeshwari. [Laughs] And somewhere umm at some level she was doing revolutionary work as mentoring. That was Raji. She used to get all kinds of people together. 'You also write, you also write' she would say. We couldn't get artwork done so we would do it ourselves. Raji used to draw. [Laughs]

Now I laugh at the artwork of the cover page. [Continues laughing] That made me truly understand autonomous politics. Ways we can work together even with dissent. The value of dissent. [Pause] and then it ... I am not someone who can only do thinking, I need activity for my hands and legs as well. In so many meetings I have said 'oh, my bottom is hurting from so much sitting and discussion. How much discussion you do, as if you had nothing else to do. Sit quietly'. Why should we discuss so much, things will happen naturally, still those discussions taught us the need for clarity. It occurred to us that this is what it is for. That was a great learning process in Manasa. Then... one thing was that all of us were working and had families, with that...

L: When did you take up a job?

S: I got a job quickly, in '86. I finished my MA in '85 and for six months, I hung around and joined work in '86. One freedom of the job was that there was money coming to hand. Umm then I joined as a mere clerk. When I joined I had decided that I don't want promotion. If you are moving upwards, it means moving towards the management and the responsibilities are more. The pay was very good there. There were loans available for everything in the bank. I was very happy. This much is enough for me. Right in the beginning I had given it in writing that I don't want a promotion. And money also, till my case in '91 I had not a paisa saved in my account. And loans also, for different people, someone wanted a gold loan, someone wanted something else, I lived like that. Means, to that extent I understood, we talk about decentralisation, we talk about non- hierarchy, am I correct? Can I become someone's boss? So it was ideal to be a clerk. And in any case we are not below poverty line. And money used to come. Should I acquire personal property or not? I dint save any money. 'Lets see, when I need it, some housing society will give a loan'. I felt I must have a house. I started internalising the process. Oh, ho, we talk about equality, or dignity and there should be respect for everybody's work. That these are very important values was my internal journey. Umm [pause] for me, as I said earlier, I need work for my hands and legs. I am as physical person. I needed things like theatre and singing. In '97... it was also disturbing me. Now I am able to say that I was disturbed and needed an outlet. Those days it was only fights. Those days I felt that the women's groups should fulfil all our needs. And it should have an answer to all my problems. There was no such thing, I had to look for my own outlets. And I didn't know how to raise it in the group. Then I started doing plays. It was outside Manasa. The first activity outside Mansas that I did was theatre, proscenium theatre. By that time there was my case in the bank, and I was very depressed. I was under suspension for five years and I had to fight the criminal case. I had to overcome that. I would understand, if everyone doesn't fulfil our needs, we were seeing from practical level, home, children, work and Manasa. I realised that I have to look for an outlet myself. Till then... was it a long childhood for me? [Laughs] I was under everybody's protection and the process that now I have to face the world on my own began with my bank case.

L: When was the case resolved?

S: It is still not resolved. After 20 years also I am still going as a witness. In '96 they took me back in the bank. In three criminal cases they dropped my name, in two criminal cases they took me as a witness. Then I went back to the bank and worked for five years. I had five years service then I was suspended, then there was the case and then... five years was my suspension period, then also I did activism. I was getting money 75% of my salary and some allowances. Then I worked for five years, by then it was 15 years and took VRS (voluntary retirement scheme). It is now ten years since I left the bank. I went to act in plays and at the same time in '99 I started getting involved with the struggle of Pourakarmikas (the city street cleaners).

L: I want to talk a little about your work. Earlier you said that your family was very keen that you should do IAS and you also felt that you should that. So did you try to do it or did you decide not to do it?

S: I decided not to do it. At the time of my suspension, my father put a lot of pressure on me. 'Now you do the KAS, prepare for the exam and go for a high post. You may go back to the same bank as MD. Do IAS or KAS'. He brought a lot of pressure. Then er, um it was a terrible phase of my life. Trouble that I could not even imagine. Er, I had not seen any difficulties and the first of my troubles was when my mother passed away. It was then that I joined the bank. My father thought that I would remain like that. So he took me and made me join. I didn't really like it. When he had taken me there earlier, I said I am going for the interview, but had come back home. Then he took me to the same bank and made me join. I didn't like it. I hated authority; I was not greed for money. There it was adding and subtracting money everyday. For me it was always theatre, song and poetry. I had decided to leave the bank. The first day, the day I joined, I had a bad experience. I had got shouted at by a boss. I came home crying. I had written my resignation letter also, the first day. The very first day I had written my resignation letter, saying I won't go. Then my oldest brother is like another father to me. He said 'don't worry, it is like this. You have to adjust. Things will improve. Wherever you go, it will be like this. You might get shouted at by somebody else'. So he sent me back. I wish I had left then. My life would have been different. Then there was a lot of pressure to do the exam. At least my father... if it were not for my father, I would not have been able to face my case. If I am outside and not in jail, my father is the reason for it. Day and night he waited. He did everything about the case, even if there was a lawyer, he was looking at this judgment, that judgement. He was also in the same department. At least for my father's sake, I felt that I should study and join a good job. I thought I would become an AC and then leave the job. I studied seriously. He would get applications and make me fill it up and he would get all the books needed for the exam. If he asked me to write my priority, I would say I wanted to be come a jail warden or a remand home warden. I would list priorities like that. I had pressure from three sides, my brother, my brother in law and my father. They would say 'write AC, write AC as your first preference'.

L: AC means?

S: Assistant Commissioner. My heart was not in it. I was not capable of administration. But these people were not able to understand. In the end I said that I would work in a remand home because there will be children there and entered that. I wouldn't go for the exam. The third time I studied seriously. I studied and one fine day I felt 'is this my life? Is this what I have to choose?' By that time I felt that if I wanted to do something for society, I already had found a path. We talk about hierarchy, power, and when I thought of all that, I was convinced that I was not fit for this. Then I requested my father 'I can't do this Appa, I will not be happy'. I am, er I am... in an organisation I am not fit to be a even a clerk. If you tell me to go be a boss, I will die every second. It was very painful. The bank haunted me, its only after I left that I was free. I had learnt that I should be rooted, principled but one should be aware when people misused me. I did not have that awareness. I started getting afraid of loosing my self, I thought it was not safe and I left the bank and in the suspension period, I did my B.ed. With my desire to work with children, [laughs], I thought I would teach high school children. I would look for a government job and go to a village. I thought I would teach and live happily and so I worked hard and finished my B.Ed. It was there that Indumathi Rao was my teacher. [Laughs]. Favourite, I was her favourite student and she was my favourite teacher. I was determined to get a 1st class. I studied very hard. I didn't eat and didn't sleep; I studied that hard. They hadn't given me a seat in MES college, because of my marks percentage. In my BA marks, including everything it was only 48 or 49%. And I had told them 'I guarantee you that I will pass in 1st class. So give me a seat'. Then, I think, Indumathi Rao was also there, in the selection panel. I wanted a 1st class, because with a 1st class from MES college, I would get a job anywhere. But because of my bad luck, my case did not finish. In every application they ask if there is a criminal case against you. How could I tell lies? My father said 'put it, child, by that time the case might be over, or we can do something'. It didn't happen. Then the age bar applied to me for a government job. I think I was 38. By that time I was old enough for VRS, I applied and got it. According to government rules, for SC and ST it is 38 years and for others it is 35 years. So that was gone. Doing B.ed was good. And the involvement with the Pourakarmikas union grew to an extent. I started feeling somewhere that I should work, with commitment with the people who need it the most. There are other people with problems, its not that they don't have problems and that they are happy, but I started feeling that I wanted to identify with the people whose labour and struggle, society is not even willing to acknowledge. They had kept me in a state home for one day. They had arrested me and sent me to the state home. There, they had kept me with street sex workers. That was changed the path of my life. I was in a state of shock, I could not speak, I wanted to die that day. The women were all sex workers. I couldn't understand what they were saying. They asked me 'where did they arrest you? Did you get caught before or after?' I didn't know before or after what. And they were talking amongst themselves. After a long time, one woman said 'oh ho. After a long time I had found a customer, he had got me palau, I had put my hand... and the policeman came'. They asked me about my home and where I had come from and saw the chain round my neck, the ring on my finger. I used to wear my mother's jewellery, in her memory. I used to feel that my mother in my hands, or in the necklace. i wondered, will they take my chain? More than the value of the chain, it was my mother's. For a long time I

sat in a corner. I didn't get up. I didn't answer their questions. Umm, and then one woman said 'shut up. Why are you asking that wretch so many times?' umm, umm [pause] 'leave it, looks like she is from a rich family. Umm, she said, one woman said. Another woman said, 'oh ho, we are not women who have eyed someone's house, we have not stolen anything, we have not hit any one's livelihood and earned money. We sell our bodies and eat. Have we stolen? Then what was I? The complaint against me was that I had stolen 50 lakhs. What was the morality? According to them, I was the immoral one. I had stolen but they had worked hard. The question was whether I had stolen or not. That was shocking for me. I was very silent, but it was sinking in me. I didn't get up. It was cold, and in there, they don't give anything. I think these women are arrested frequently. They had their own bed sheets and shawls. [Laughs]. Then two women came and told me 'come here and sleep. There is the wind over there'. I didn't come; I sat as in a trance. Two women came, carried me and laid me between two women, sat down and they pulled a bit of one blanket from one woman and another bit from the woman on the other side. But I wanted to urinate; from the morning I had not urinated. Two of them took me and it was a stinking toilet. They said 'let it be, you can't go inside. Urinate outside only'. So I urinated there and they brought me inside, and made me lie down between them. In that cold, the warmth that they gave was very moving. [Voice breaks with tears, silence] It was there that I saw real humanness. The people who called themselves respectable, had humiliated me very much, they had shamed me. Looking at that I was very hurt. And then when I understood what they were saying and who they were... and getting up in the morning, somebody has to sweep, somebody has to cook, they throw a sliver of soap to wash our clothes and a small piece to bathe. The women have to sweep and mop and cook and eat. What is the food? They bring a ball of mudde (balls made of ragi) and chatney in an aluminium plate. 'Hey, get up and work'. My father had brought me up lovingly in a middle class home, feeding me ghee and rice (upper class food). We never used to take orders. If my father fought with me, I wouldn't eat till he said sorry. He could call me 'sorry my child, come'. Why should I sweep here? The dear people did not make me do any work. They understood that I was not ok. They did not make me sweep or mop or do anything. [Laughs] Then they brought me food, and said 'at least eat'. I hadn't even eaten. I thought to myself, if my father doesn't come I will die. I had a blade with me. In my dress... they search everything and take it away. But that one thing I had with me. By that time someone said 'somebody from Saraswathi's side has come' and called me. The next day... I am in court, to be produced. No, the next day was Sunday. They took me home, produced me in court and got me bail. The next time I had to go to court, all these poor girls were there. The police had arrested and brought them. For me... I was in a different world. I very much wanted to go and talk to them. None of them came near me, poor things. I recognised them. They only laughed. And then I thought, if my life has to have a use, I have to stand by the poorest and most vulnerable. The sex workers, the ones who clean the shit, I must work with them. We don't even recognise them even as people. At that time ... I thought... one film. Nilanjana had called me and told me that I must see that film. I felt very bad; I was anguished when I saw that film. I saw the whole film with tears in my eyes. And then, the film was not good. I didn't like the way the film was made. The shit cleaners, they have directly shown them.

They have a life outside of that too. They laugh, they have a life, and that completes it. Not just this. The camera in the whole film follows the woman who cleans the shit. In the end, unable to bear it, she says 'how many times are you going to follow me? Go away'. Another time... the film ends with 'why don't other people do this work?' She says 'eey, they are all human'. So they are all human, but you? She covers her face with her sari. But they themselves don't think they are human. I didn't like the way the film was made. I realised that there is a life like this. A life that endures everything. It was at that time that I met the Pourakarmika Union people. The dalit union was the one working with the Pourakarmika issue. There was no one else working. They said 'come and talk to these women, then you will know what is true feminism', and threw the challenge. This was a dalit activist. I said 'why do you challenge? Say 'come and do this, this is your responsibility' and invite me. Why will I say 'I wont come?' I then went for their first meeting. My entry was...

L: When was this?

S: I think it was '99. My entry was my doing the play 'Sanna Thimmi'. There... here already I was identified with the feminist movement, so they invited me talk at the Pourakarmika meeting. A lot of women were there. Thinking that a speech was useless, I performed 'Sanni Thimmi' play. I did that play because it shows the importance of making a union, why it is important for them to organise themselves. That was my first interaction with them. They liked the play very much. 'Madam'... in that play there is talk about greens curry, and farm eggs being good. There is also talk about mutton curry in the play. So when I said that, it became a point for them. They started saying 'come to my house, I will make curry for you, I will make mutton curry for you', so saying they acknowledged me. That was another journey. I was a little comforted. I thought that I had joined where I belonged. And in Manasa also, wherever we were, we brought it all to Manasa. I was also in an anti nuclear platform, and wherever else I could be. The nuclear energy was another thing, err, I became involved in children who were brain damaged. I love children very much. I was against the bomb because I wanted children born to me to be all right. That was all; there was no other logic. They should be healthy with whole arms and legs. All these people who want war... they should all go to a field and fight with each other and die. You must ask mothers what a life means. You must ask mothers. Thinking that, I had done a play on Hiroshima. We did 80 shows all over Karnataka. Along with the Pourakarmikas, I worked with that full time and it sapped my energy. It gave full reign to my passions, my emotions and the energy to work very hard. For Manasa... I had invited Manasa people also. They were there in the support group. Raji used to come to build self- help groups. And there were a lot of special issues in Manasa about the pourakarmikas. The issue was written about in great detail. These people are not literate, they are the lowest caste, and it is a very difficult life. Here, the politics of de-centralisation, non-hierarchic, democratic I want to bring these to the wider public and that was my question. I must check power, that which comes from the background of my education, class. I am very powerful. How should I check that? To bring really collective politics, they must necessarily, whether they want it or not, engage with real world of the citizens. Citizens

are the ones who give them something. They have to learn public speaking, they have to learn to write, all this... but they are fighters at the gut level. I have gained a lot from them. People who are called street whores, the people who clear the shit have helped me to become a human being in the true sense. It is because of these people who are kept at a distance, that I became a human being. And this... I should be alert. If I think I am getting something and run away, they will simply have to follow me. Then the pressure began. I looked forward that my group should support me. At the very least they should support me emotionally. That the Manasa... er... then, again in the women's group... in other groups, when we bring up personal issues and say that we can't handle them, they say 'shut up and get lost'. But here, there was a space where I could demand, right? That started conflict in the group. I started feeling that I was alone. I was working with these comrades and they believed in authority. What do they call it [laughs] 'benevolent dictatorship'? If you want to achieve democracy, this is necessary. 'We have to lead them'. No, the process is as important as the goal. If self realisation is my goal, I have to go this way. On one side, there are the negotiations with the comrades, the unaware workers, but they too have egos. One can't say that because they are pourakarmikas, they have overcome all the bad qualities. The pressure began to mount. And I started feeling strongly that these people are not supporting me. And then somewhere, there was a feeling that the feminist movement was about the difficulties of urban, literate, upper class and caste women. In the Manasa group, to take the initiative and be in the forefront, ... the pourakarmika struggle was the intersection of gender, caste and class. In this there are 80%, 90% women. And almost everybody, more than 95% are low caste, dalits. And all of them are poor. The comrades were apprehensive that the ideology will become real. I thought that it could be disproved and everyone will stand behind me. But here... no one did it deliberately, but they didn't and that started doubts. Then what are the politics that we believe in? Do we have to work for the downtrodden? Can we not bring this about? When we say a group – let there be rich people, shit cleaners, sex workers, if a hijra wants to come let her. A group like that... I was not aware of the difficulties to bring about that kind of an idealistic vision. At a minimum I wanted people from Manasa to enquire how I was and had I eaten. That is the level of my attachment. People at Manasa could have asked me, I might have got angry. But they should have enquired after my well being. Do I have enough, they should have asked me. They should have said a few words to me. Those kinds of things started in Manasa. And then, I started getting very involved in the pourkarmika's issues and it was not possible to work in Manasa also, but they were very good. Even if I was not working, my name was prominent as being on the editorial board. Even if I did not raise money, my name was there. And then I said that it was not correct and was not in keeping with our politics. If I have not worked with something, I should not ask for any share. But definitely my solidarity has gone ahead with Manasa. There were a lot of major problems, frictions came up and I started feeling very much alone. I had to struggle in this world and relationships between men and women in the group. I took responsibility beyond my limits with the men. Then there was a lot of pressure to become the General Secretary of the pourkarmika union. Because of that, there was a lot of conflict within me. Was I able to become the spokesperson for these people? Could I become a leader? Should there not be a collective leadership? These were my questions. So I didn't accept.

But with all the support and help to evolve and build a collective leadership, but what we had anticipated did not happen in the group. And I did not get the support from my comrades in the pourkarmika movement. Every time there was a struggle. [pause] I am accepting my responsibility for that. What is my role here? I will not become their leader officially. But I wanted to work. And though I was not an office bearer, I was powerful. People used to say 'are you the general secretary to say this?' Then it became a question for me –if you don't have a post, how can you be so powerful? Somehow we built a collective leadership. There were money problems. But some things were successful. The support group that was built, everybody was there, there were comrades, feminists and human rights activists, there were sexual minorities. In one protest march, Sumathi had brought some Hindustani singers. Girish Kasaravalli had come. To demonstrate publicly that we would all symbolically sweep the streets, we had invited all these people. That was a good process. Though it was play-acting, it was a good experience. Now the women's group are involved. The Samatha Mahila Sanghatana women.

L: They are a Marxist group, right?

S: Earlier it was Mahila Jagriti. They are the same people. Lets not record this. Some of the people were in the extreme left wing. There was a rift and these are the people who came out. They felt that they wanted to use the democratic space outside. Gowri and Mallige and some people have now taken up the pourkarmika issues and are working with them. And Balan the AITUC comrade is also there. And with him these people are also there. They have taken up a lot of questions and have done very good work.

L: Is the pourkarmika union affiliated?

S: They are with the AITUC. Ours was autonomous. That union collapsed. All the... it was kind of dismantled. Jayamma was the one who was active and now she is working with the comrades. I felt that we should have reflected. I am very tired and 'what is my role? What are my limits?' Were the questions inside me. When these questions came up, I withdrew a little. If I were here, they would definitely equate me with the leadership. [Pause] That is natural. To be aware and alter to that, I needed a different process. It could very easily go to our heads. But yes, I have authority, and that authority I should use for the union, but I should not become their leader. 'How should I do this?' I needed time to reflect on these issues. There were frictions in the union also. Only Jayamma was working in some of the wards. And when Balan took up these issues and started working, I asked Jayamma to work with him. And for me, for about 2 or 3 years I was completely at home. I got married and wanted children. I got married very late. At that time I was forced, [pause] to stay at home. Then I started reflecting. Then I felt that if I don't have this internal journey, then all my work is meaningless. One can do activities blindly. And then ...I... I am not a complete radical at all. I look at my activism as a spiritual journey. It is not only pertaining to the intellect. Somewhere, it should also teach me to look at myself. For these kinds of reflections I wanted space. That was also the limitations of the group. Have I been able to get over my anger? If my husband beats me, just go and give a police complaint. And get a lawyer and the family court and all that. But I see

in my family that my brother is beating my sister in law, why am I not able to give a police complaint? To reflect and scrutinise all this I wanted space. All these processes happened at that time. Er, er [pause] and then, was the spiritual quest that was inside me and my activism compatible? What was happening was that... both these were two parallels. There was no meeting point. Instinctively I felt that there was a meeting point. I consider all my activist friends as spiritual. Because... something is not right. Not right means; whatever people are struggling for is, I think, a spiritual journey. Then I found my path with vipasana meditation, which made me look into myself and my own flaws. And my own arrogance and the violence within me also, the power within me. Vipasana helped me look at all these things in myself. At one level I was thinking, if there was no possibility of talk of spiritualism in this extreme radicalism, I was feeling that I don't mind giving it up. Through vipasana I realised that this is also a spiritual journey. I was able to prove this to myself through vipasana. After that I was able to locate my role. One, like the Buddha says to look at reality as reality, not as you want it to be. What is my reality? I am an urban and financially comfortable. Under no circumstances will we beg in Kalasipalayam. I belong to that class. This is my reality. I am not one to go to the shit cleaners and say that I too will clean shit. It is not that there is alienation there; the people embraced me with a lot of love. I too cared for them and it is a strong relationship. But the truth is that I belong to this class. There is this class and there is that class. They are worlds apart. Sometimes it seems that they will never come together. Sometimes it seems, no, no they will come together. It is definitely possible and we should unite as people. That is a dream of mine. I can be a bridge between the two and that is my role. I should not negate this world. At one point I felt discomfort for upper class, upper caste and urban activism. No, these people are human beings and those people too are human beings. We don't know the environment and we should learn that. If we make a small hole in the wall, at least some breeze will pass through. At least we can smell each other. Oh, we didn't even know the smell of each other. If there is a bridge at least we can walk on it. I felt this strongly. Like that, far away from this extreme activism and politics and through vipasana, I felt that this was possible. And I am here {pause} through my writing or other activities, I now feel that it is possible. The other thing that helped was the understanding that authority was not being a big officer or money or wealth or education but it is very subtle. That struck me. I was wearing only cotton and had a jhola (cotton bag) and shaping myself for these people, that martyrdom was also authority. Sometimes... even that I am spiritual is arrogance. I feel that I am better than these people because I have conquered my arrogance. And I have worked for so many years, the experience it self gives me authority. I can become a dada. At that point I felt that I should step back. This is a relationship that will last till death. And then, new people must keep coming in, like a relay race. I must give the relay to somebody else. I have taken retirements early. [Laughs]. I was 38 when I took VRS from the bank. So for activism also I must take VRS. When I thought of how to do it, I have thought of schemes for myself. I go and have connection with people, and get involved. But I soon recognise where I am becoming powerful. It is definitely not that I have overcome everything. In my journey I have begun to understand how far I have come. In the spiritual journey, I feel 'oh this didn't occur to me' and I feel ashamed. If I stand in front of the mirror, I feel yuk. I have found a

mirror like that, where I can see myself. 'Oh I am dirty here, or this is good.' The spiritual journey is like that mirror. From my deep interiority, when I feel that things are not all right, it is the voice of my mother. When I am doing something 'enough show off'. [Laughs] we can find out right, now that has become possible. Like that, now I [pause] don't need a tag. I am with workers and I am with women. Its only if all come together, that things will change. It is not possible to stay like islands. I fight with Marxists, but I am with them. I am also with feminists. I am with these people, I am with those people, I am with everybody. In Hyderabad, the other day, I trashed the whole discussion and made it into shit. The Saheli people were there. Did they tell you?

L: No.

S: there is something 'feministindia'?

L: I didn't get any report.

S: There the Anveshi people invited me to talk about dalit issues. Wherever I go, I talk about pourkarmikas. When you say dalit, I strongly believe in it. Class, caste and gender have to all be addressed simultaneously, it is not possible to address them in different compartments. That is my belief. So when I say I am going to talk about dalits, I talk about pourkarmikas. There also I spoke about that. The previous day people told me 'what yar, you are talking about...' When I was talking, at times, in the middle the words 'piss' and 'shit' would come out. And then somebody came and asked me, 'what you are talking only about shit and piss'. So I said 'tomorrow you will understand why I talk about shit'. [Laughs] So it came about that everybody was talking about shit. I understood that even shit is spiritual when I started the process of looking inside of myself. This is the reason that I can say maybe now I am at peace and I feel good. The reason for demanding the impossible is my foolishness. [Pause] That is not possible, we should all work, we have to look after homes, children and this also... we need exercise for our internal journey. Then I understood that movements are also limited. I should make this journey alone.

L: tell me a little about the creative aspect of your journey. Your writing, theatre, music. When was the peak? Do you think there was a peak? What was the impact of activism on your creativity? Was it positive?

S: This creative writing of mine... one day suddenly I was a poet. I was not telling anybody. Though I was writing for years, I had not shown it to anybody. Those days when I was in pain, I thought that the world did not know who and what I was, so they were humiliating me. And I felt that once they knew, they would regret it. Once there was a competition and I had a hand written manuscript of all the poems I had written. I had written in dairy and thrown it in a box. To prove what I was. I don't know from where I got the feeling that I write good poetry. [Laughs] I wouldn't show anybody, but I was confident that what I write is nice. Otherwise why the hell should I send it to the competition?

L: When was this?

S: In '97. I sent it. But then inside... inside me there is always a girl taunting me. [Laughs] I had a long childhood that I spent with my mother. My mother had a great influence in shaping my personality. At that time I felt 'enough'. I had forgotten that. But I had won the prize. It was an honour to win the Kadangolu Shankar Bhatt award that was given in Dakishna Kannada. This was given to new poets. They give the award to a manuscript. If we print it, we have to give them two copies. I didn't know all that. Somebody told me and I said 'oh, why are you making jokes?' Then they said that I was the only Du Saraswathi living in Rajajinagar. In the literature circles, I am Du Saraswathi. [Laughs]. That has now become like a pen name. Getting the award, I became a poet. Both the activities complete me. Without my activism my writing becomes dry and my activism is meaningless without my creative writing and my spiritual journey. Or we should just do it. Activism could also give us a high. It might give the feeling that I have sacrificed everything and that I am great. It does give that feeling. It makes one self-righteous.

L: People say that if you haven't seen unhappiness, you can't be a poet. What do you think?

S: For me? [pause] may be...

L: That it comes from a lot of pain. Do you feel that in your creative writing?

S: It is necessary for me to write about my inner churnings. That is another aspect of my lone journey. I must write. It is a painful process. It is like when vomiting relieves a migraine headache. I must spit it out. I used to write like that. I would not re work it. A lot of people have told me to take my writing seriously. Activism was my priority. Whenever there was a dilemma whether I should sit alone and write or should go for a protest when somebody in difficulty, I always chose to go for the protest. I sit alone and write and after that I get a name only as an individual. If I write well or act well, my name will come in the newspapers. It may also boost my ego. Rather than say it is wrong or bad, I acknowledge it. It is a great pleasure when people clap after I have acted well. Or whistled in appreciation. That has given pleasure. Then I have felt happy when people have praised my poetry. That is ego. It may be another facet of the ego. I had kept it at a distance. I would not fine-tune my writing. I would write whatever was needed for my activism. Now I re work it. In activism also there came a process to refine it. And in my creative writing also there is a process of refining it. I used to talk for hours to the pourkarmikas about law, their situation, and I wrote a story about it. Now when I have to speak, I read that story. That reaches a lot of people. It is about actual problems. Only the language is mine. It is very powerful. It is called 'Bachesu'. My strategies also changed after seeing the pourkarmikas. They have taught me so much. We used to go there and feel very frustrated that nothing is happening. We have reformed laws, we have protested, and we met people. We are helpless. Why are we so helpless? I have experienced subtle humiliation because of my caste. But I have not experienced what

my father experienced. The anger against things that happen in the name of caste, the disrespect with which people spoke to me, I started feeling that this anger has no base. My helplessness was because, people like us have come here and think we have done so much – memorandums, pamphlets, protests, we have gone and met the government officers, we have done all this. We have all got publicity in the newspapers. And if nothing has changed after we came here. That is my ego problem. One day they said ‘Madam we were here before you came here, we are still here, even if you go away tomorrow, we will be here. Why are you so pained?’ Things came to a head in me. I had come here to be a martyr. If tomorrow there is a war, like the chandamama (children’s comic books) the pourkarmikas will live happily ever after. They have taught me the small lessons of life. To live with very little and to be happy. Do you know how happy they are? [Laughs]. They are so happy, on Sundays and Wednesdays they bring half-kilo mutton and make ragi mudde and they all eat together. That is happiness. They go to Mutyalma temple, take vows and worship and come back. That is another great delight. They go when someone dies, when there is a birth. They are so happy with their children. It is possible for me to show people the hidden world of the pourkarmikas. I can effectively do it through my creative writing or poetry or theatre. This world doesn’t know it. All the ills of the world like illiterate, improvised are heaped on them. They feel that those who clean shit are shit. I say that there are things you can learn from them. If you want to get over the great superiority complex or inferiority complex, you have to learn the wealth that is inside the pourkarmikas. You have to learn the reality and truth of life from them. These people should give the pourkarmikas good working conditions; good pay, look at them as people and give them the dignity of labour. This should come from the government. There should be give and take from both sides. I am not saying that all is good about the pourkarmikas, but I want to show this in my writing. They cook and eat well, they do good rangoli designs, they wear colourful clothes, and look at anyone of them – they have big anklets, they always have flowers in their hair, even when they come to sweep. And they joke so much. When we are all sitting in protest, slowly they slip a note into someone’s shirt and start giggling. Everywhere they are happy. My creative writing is between these two worlds. Two or three stories, actually four or five stories are there. I keep telling these stories in the other world. I come to the pourkarmika world and tell them other stories. Wherever possible I bridge the gap between the two worlds and try and bring them together with my creative writing. The literature of these people is the story of my creative writing. May be um um um all this writing... rather than writing a poem one should live like a poem. Perhaps if I look at another outlet for my writing, I will stop writing. [Pause] I don’t feel that I should die writing. One day I may stop writing, might stop acting, [laughs] this... I might move on from activism also. I might sit under a tree, gather a lot of children and tell them stories. [Laughs] I like that kind of thing and now I keep looking for things like that. I go to places and sit and chat for hours with somebody. This is a big treasure, the vitality of these poor, low caste women. If this vitality comes into the movement, it will be greatly enriched. In them... if fact when I get an award, I am ashamed. I write and I am like this world demands I speak

English of this world, I write literature that they want, I can articulate well. I have that language. In the pourkarmikas a woman would be writing some thing like an epic and she gets no credit. So whenever I read a story or do a play and it is appreciated, in fact people come and wish me with tears in their eyes. When they clap for a moment I silently think this much is mine and this much belongs to the pourkarmikas. Whatever money I get, I keep some aside for them. I say this in a simple and unassuming way. Its not to show off, but the credit needs to go to them. In all this I am a part. There is all this in me. In the midst of all this, I feel that too is there. [pause] all this I have been able to express in my creative writing. All the things deep in me, when I talk to my deeper self, all that is in my writing. May be, if my spiritual journey pulls me further, then there may be no need for me to write. There are so many people going around telling stories. There is a woman Darogi Erramma, she sings seven epic poems in seven days with only a tanpura. Her sings is awesome. Compared to her, all the people who have done PhDs are nowhere. Do you know the number of people who have done PhDs on Darogi Erramma's poetry? I want to sit and listen to her and do a PhD on her and this haunts me. In some university... how much power there is in the brain. She stays in one place. This is something that eats me from inside. I could also be like her, and then I feel that all this is not necessary. [Laughs] What is it? I had read Bachesu in our sangha. I told them I would publish it and I wanted them to approve. It occurred to me that I had written about these people's lives and I wanted them to approve publication. Was that all right? They all sat and listened. They clapped. One woman was called Venkatamma and they said 'oh madam, that is our story. We have no objections. Publish it where ever you want.' I wrote the story to win a prize. They were giving 15,000 for the best story. Venkatamma's grandchild was born without fingers and toes. There was an operation need. So I thought if I get 15000 rs prize money, then we can raise another 15000. It didn't get the prize. Who will give a prize to that kind of a story about pourkarmikas. There is no dearth of caste, class and gender issues in literature. So the ideology of struggle itself changed. They way they protested was the basis of this story. [Laughs] that is all. If you ask my anything I will tell you.

L: I think we will stop here. Thank you for sharing your life actually; it is more than just a story.

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