

BHARATI DE

Interviewed by Rajashri Dasgupta

Bharati De is secretary of the Durbar Mahila Samanvaya Committee (DMSC), a collective of 65,000 sex workers in West Bengal. Established in February 1992, in Sonagachi, the largest red-light district in Kolkata, Durbar works on women's rights and sex workers' rights advocacy, anti-human trafficking and HIV/ AIDS prevention and runs a bank and micro-credit scheme for sex workers.

Rajashri Dasgupta (RD): The first thing that I would like to know is, where were you born?

Bharati De (BD): I was born in Naihati, West Bengal but I do not know when. My mother's name was Suhasini Das and my father's name was Sushil Das. My father did not have a job. We had land – so we did farming.

RD: How much land did you have?

BD: That I do not know. We had a lot of fruits and vegetables. There used to be machines for making sugarcane juice. It was a huge thing. We had about 10 or 12 people who did farming in our land. My uncle had a son and then he died. My mother did not have children in the early years after her marriage so she had to face a lot of torture. There used to be a lot of trouble about the generation dying out and all that. My grandmother used to torture my mother a lot. In fact, the pressure was so much that my mother asked my father to get married again. My father remarried. The funny thing was that my mother got pregnant after my father got married again. So we are 10 siblings. We have four brothers and I am the third child among the sisters. I have given the Madhyamik (middle-school) examination

RD: All of you studied in Naihati?

BD: Yes all of us studied there.

RD: Did your mother also study?

BD: No my mother was not educated. My father sometimes wrote letters for lawyers and all that. I mean my father was a very important man in our village. Everybody respected him a lot.

RD: Where did you get the inspiration to study?

BD: From my home. My two brothers are working now. They used to be very good football players. They got jobs from that source. My eldest brother is a member of the Party (CPM). And there is my youngest brother – he has not studied much because my father died while he was studying. Anyway, there was an ambience of studying in my home. The best thing was that all my brothers and sisters used to sit together and study. We did not have electric lights so we lit a lamp and studied. We used to sit according to our classes. This is how my

childhood passed. We were quite happy. We did not have to worry about the farming or the money or anything. We just studied and played. I was very good in all kinds of sports.

RD: Who were you close to as a child?

BD: I was very close to my father. My nickname is Beto. I used to be more intelligent than my sisters. My father loved me a lot.

RD: Did you like studying?

BD: Yes. I was in Class seven when my father died. After my father's death my brothers started to think about splitting the property. My father said that he had left enough for everyone – he had 20 bighas of land in his name. My mother had passed away when I was born. I was a premature baby. Anyway, my eldest brother and the second eldest brother separated – they said that they could not take the responsibilities of the sisters' studies anymore. They wanted to get us married off one by one. They started looking for grooms. I had said that I wanted to study and not get married. Anyway, my sisters got married and soon it was my turn. So I got to class nine... but my brothers did not buy the books. They said that I did not have to study anymore. I was forced to leave school. I used to sit at home and study.

RD: Who did all the housework?

BD: My aunt was there. There were other people as well. Even then jaggery was prepared in my house from sugarcane. Now there is nothing. My father had left the property in the name of my brothers.

RD: The sisters did not get anything?

BD: I am coming to that later. My father had given me 20 bighas. He had asked for that land to be divided equally among all the sisters. There was a boy named Anukul. We studied in the same class. I used to borrow books from Anukul and study. My brothers did not buy me books. Anyway one of the teachers in the school helped me a lot. So it was very difficult – I studied in 9 and 10 like this. My aunt's daughter used to work for Nilratan Sarkar Hospital. Even I wanted to work there. For the Madhayamik exam my seat was in Halisahar – Annapurna School.

RD: How far was that school?

BD: One station away from Naihati. Anyway, I was very weak in Mathematics. I was good in History and English. I wouldn't have passed if I hadn't cheated in the Mathematics exam! After the exams I saw an advertisement in Anandabazar for the position of a sales girl. This was in Baguihati. I took down the address and went to Baguihati from Naihati. Before this I had never been to Calcutta. But I was very brave. I did not get scared easily. I went there and saw that many girls were waiting there – standing in a line – so I asked them what we had to sell. They said that we had to sell cosmetics. So I fixed everything there and returned home and told everyone that I had got a job. My brother asked me what job I had got and then I asked him if he wanted to come with me and see the place. Now my first posting was in Bhagalpur. My brother went there himself to drop me.

RD: You did not get any kind of training?

BD: Yes that was after we went to Bhagalpur. So anyway, not for once did my brother try to find out about the place or the people. I was just 15 or 16 years and they just let me go. Basically, they were just waiting for me to leave the home. Anyway, they used to give Rs 60 per month during the training in Bhagalpur. We were three girls in one group. At first, I used to be very shy because the boys used to tease us. They called us 'sindoor waali', 'alta waali'. There was a girl called Anjali who was in charge. We complained to her but she just said that we should ignore them. Anyway, I used to feel very bad, and waited for my Madhyamik results. Three months passed away like this. Exactly after three months I got a letter from my brother – it was just two lines – 'You have passed in Second Division'. I was happy but I was also very sad to see that my brothers did not even call me back once after I had done well in the examination. They never even thought of bringing me back and helping me continue my studies.

So I left Bhagalpur and went to Patna. I used to work. But there was always this thought bothering me – what was I working for? Anyway Patna was a huge city – I was there for six months. There I fell in love with a man. This man worked in a bank. I got to know him while travelling. At that time I thought that if I got married to this man I would not have to return and sell cosmetics. I could settle down with him.

The man was married but did not have relations with his wife. At that point I could not even think straight... so I got married to him. I had thought that I would settle down with him. I went to his house but within six months his wife returned! The man's mother was quite a nice woman. So even after the wife returned all of us used to stay together. I used to cook and do the housework. Suddenly, one day a neighbour asked me why I was working like a slave in that house? She said that I was quite good looking and young and I could go anywhere. So one day, I took a train and came straight to Naihati. I did not even buy a ticket. I came to Naihati to my friend's place. Her name was Sushmita. I asked her to look for a place where I could stay but she said that why would anyone give me a place. Meanwhile I met a man who used to sell nuts. He knew me and liked me. He was like a grandfather. He asked me where I was all this while. He said that my house was there – but I told him that I would not go home. He got me a place to stay for Rs. 300. The name of that place was Munshibagan. The person who owned that house was Harabala Das. She was a sex worker from Chandannagar. I did not understand all of this back then.

RD: Did the grandfather know?

BD: I don't know that. Anyway, I became friends with that woman and told her everything. Then she told me to make pickle packets. I got Rs. 2.50 for a thousand packets. At first, I used to be very slow at this. But gradually, I learnt how to do this work. Half the days I would eat at Mashi's place, even her daughter liked me a lot. Suddenly, one day my husband came to my house. He used to send money and also come to visit me. But somehow his wife got to know of this again and he stopped coming. However, he sent me a certain amount of money per month. He used to send Rs 3000. That was enough for me. This was about 25 years ago. Then I got pregnant. Gradually my husband also stopped sending money.

RD: Didn't anyone talk to you and explain things back then?

BD: No. I was very foolish back then. I gave birth to my son. I was in a lot of trouble. I sold whatever ornaments I had.

RD: Didn't you try to get in touch with your husband?

BD: Yes. I went to Patna with my son. But they insulted me. I felt very bad and returned with my son. I decided that I would bring up my son alone. I came back and told Mashima that I had to do something to earn money. There was someone called Phani da who said that he would take me to Barrackpore at 2:30. I went there and understood that he was not a good man. I returned home and told Mashima that I would take up the nursing training. She used to support me a lot. She is not alive now. She said that I had to look after my son and she could give me one job – I asked what – and she told me that it was the job of a sex worker. I agreed.

RD: How old were you?

BD: I was 22. So the man took me there.

RD: Where?

BD: Barrackpore. Talpukur. I saw the atmosphere there. Everybody was abusing. It was not good. I could understand.

RD: Where did you keep your son?

BD: I had kept him with Mashima. I had to travel everyday from my house to Talpukur. I kept my son with my landlady. I told everyone that I worked as an Ayah. If I sat there quietly, then the Mashis in Talpukur would get angry. I had to drink. Anyway, my landlady told me that it would be very difficult at first but then it would become all right.

RD: You did not have any doubts about that?

BD: No. I just thought that I had to earn money. On the one hand, I was very stubborn – I did not want to return home and I would do anything to resist going back. I did not want to keep any relationship with my brothers. I was deeply hurt. But it was also a kind of promise I made to myself. I was very hurt because they did not let me continue my studies.

RD: Was it difficult at first?

BD: Yes. But I was quite lucky because most of the customers used to be from the BSF (Border Security Force). They would come straight from the airport. All these policemen were also my customers. This was good for me. Gradually I understood that the Mashis benefitted a lot more than I did. Also, the other girls used to be jealous of me because I used to get more customers. The standard customers would come to me and that is how I made

more money. I never abused people or got into fights. I used to be very shy. I felt ashamed to fight. Actually, I used to get the good customers because my behaviour was so good.

RD: At first you were with one man – your husband. But then after joining sex work you had to sleep with different men. Was this very difficult for you?

BD: No. I used to earn whatever I could in the morning. I did not take any customers at night. At first there used to be some trouble physically but gradually my body got used to that. I knew that this was the only way I could earn money so I stuck to it.

RD: How much did you earn at that time?

BD: I used to earn about Rs 40-50 per day. But I used to earn a little more. Actually, the customers were pleased and gave me more money; they used to give me good tips. I think the customers understood that I was from a good family. Anyway, then the landlady started creating trouble – she used to bring alcohol everyday to my room and they started drinking in my room. I was not used to this. I could not drink so much. They handed me a glass and asked me to drink but I couldn't. She said that I would not be able to do sex work properly if I did not drink. She almost forced me to drink.

RD: Why? Why did they force you so much?

BD: Actually they were alcoholics. They wanted to get me drunk so that I could not keep count of the customers who visited me. This way they could mess with the accounts. They would not give me money properly. This was the reason. Then there were fights in the liquor shops. There was a boy called Potol, he told me that he knew that there was someone called Mujayat who came to the liquor shop at night and stole liquor.

The next day I saw that the place was full of policemen. They were questioning everyone about what had happened. There was a policeman called Swapan Babu. He knew me. He asked me what I was doing there and I requested him not to tell anyone about me. I told him Mujayat's name. Then they arrested him and took him away in a van. We thought that it was a good thing because Mujayat was someone who troubled everyone. He was a member of the Party and harassed everyone. But he got bail and came out again. Suddenly, one morning I saw all the women running so I asked around what had happened. Then I heard that Mujayat had picked up a woman called Savitri. Savitri was the daughter of a sex worker there. Initially Savitri's mother did not tell me – she thought that I did not know – but then I asked her directly and she told me what had happened.

So after he (Mujayat) got out from jail he went to the Party. He told the MP that he would never enter that locality or do anything dishonestly – I will only live honestly, work in a shop. The MP then asked the local people to talk to him. The local people told him that about an organisation and he should come and meet me.

Now you see the problem? What could I say? They called me to a field. So I wondered why he was calling me there. Anyway, three or four of us went to the field. So he came up and said that he had to talk to me. I asked him what he wanted to talk about. Then he said that he was caught by the police for some murder case. He said that he did not murder anyone. Then he told me that he did not want to get involved in any kind of problem now – just

wanted to live honestly with his children. Then he asked me whether we would allow him to set up a shop in our locality.

I asked him why he was telling me all this! He said that he had gone to the local Party people and they sent him over to me. What could I do! I said that why don't you go to the police station! You will obviously need permission to set up a liquor shop. But he said that getting permission and everything was secondary. First he had to make sure that he would be allowed to enter the locality. I stood there thinking – and said that I could not tell him anything off hand. I asked him to come after sometime. So then...I went back and started meeting everybody in my locality and discussing the matter. I did not have the courage to openly discuss it. Some said that no matter what he would create trouble. I could not take a decision.

Then I called Bachhuda, he said that... Bacchuda was then the director (Durbar Mahila Samanvaya Samiti). He said that this was a matter for the women to decide, and whatever the local people said. So I spoke to the senior women again, about 10 or 12 of them. They said that what to do, give him one chance. No matter what he will enter at night and create a raucous. So I gave him another chance. He came in and set up a local liquor shop. I also gave him Rs 3000 from my own pocket to help him set up the shop! What a problem! This I haven't still told any of my friends. If they come to know they will scold me. This shop did not run well even for 15 days. Habits do not leave a person! In a few days he (Mujayat) started again – barging into the rooms of the women, raping them, doing this and that, snatching away their things...

All the houses there were made of tiles. So everyone came and complained about him to me. I was in a fix again. I called Mujayat and told him that what he was doing was wrong. He then told me that if he did do anything what was it to me, he was not disturbing me in any way. I said that doing horrible things to others was the same as doing it to me. He asked me to stay away and not get involved in his matters because he respected me. I said that if he respected me he would never have done all those horrible things over and over again. He was absolutely drunk when he was talking. I said that I would talk to him the following day because he was not in a state to talk.

So then the next day he came again and spoke very nicely to me. He asked me if I would drink tea etc., said that he would never commit those crimes again. I knew all that. But he couldn't be thrown out of the place by force – I had to think of something else. Meanwhile, in a few days he started again. He barged into a house and stole Rs 2000, raped an old woman. He also threatened to murder her if she did not give him Rs 2000 more the next day. So after this we went to the Party (CPM). Da told us to plant bombs with him and then report him to the police. From where would we get the bombs! I told him is this all you can tell us? They said yes. So then we went to Mama (CPM secretary). Mama said that the matter was very complicated. He is in such a place that if I say anything nothing would work out. So then I went to another person, but even he was useless. We were in a fix – what could we do? We knew that the only way was to break his shop. But who had the courage to break his shop? Even I did not. So then what Mujayat did was he himself got rid of the shop because he knew that the police was going to come again in this matter. And he started doing everything all over again – breaking and entering, stealing, raping – it was the day of Rath mela.

RD: So nothing could be done by Durbar too?

BD: No.. at that time I did not tell everything here. Only told about my problems sometime. At that time I did not understand that much – I did not think that this organisation (Durbar) would support us in every matter. Never thought of it at that time. So then during the Rath mela, there was a boy with whom Mujayat had a fight. Now there was another boy – he had got a job, he was an engineer. He got a job, a police officer's son. He wanted to enter the mela. So while he was entering Mujayat mistook him for the boy with whom he had a tiff. So he came in and started beating up this boy mercilessly. We told him to take the fight outside the locality. We did not want any more trouble. So he took the boy outside and hit him repeatedly. Then threw him in front of the B N Bose Hospital, everybody was just looking and watching. Then all the Party people came. The boy died. The police took Mujayat away. Then he got released again. What he did now was he entered the girls' room at midnight. Then I asked everyone whether we could do rounds as guards. Everybody agreed immediately. Everyone had the will to survive. So we started doing this duty – keeping guard from 12 to 4. One day we had a women's group on duty and the other day there was a men's group. We did alternate days. We went to Haripada Shil and said that we were doing this. So he arranged for torches and those arrow-like things they use.

RD: All the guards were sex workers?

BD: Yes, sex workers and their children... the number of children were very few. We also had Babus (patrons). I started this. I told everyone to group together. When I was small and used to go to the school there was something called the NCC.... so all these things were embedded in my head. I asked everyone agreed and we started doing this.

At 4 am, all the liquor shops and other shops in our locality open exactly after 4! We had to give duty all night. This went on for a while till one day, right at this time, around 12 or 12:30, a child came and said, he was very excited, he told me that Mujayat and his friends were having dinner at a nearby shop. So now, there was a boy called Khoka, a very brave boy. So I told him that we had to grab Mujayat this time. He was eating at a shop. I asked Khoka what we could do. He said that before taking any decision think about it. I said that there was nothing more to think about, we had to grab him. I asked him if he was game, and he said yes. So we went. Seven-eight of us women, all the men came too, and we captured three boys and Mujayat. They had never thought that we would do this. If they had weapons then we would be in a really bad spot. But luckily they did not have anything. And when we brought them to the locality – what a beating we gave him! Everyone beat him with everything they had. Now even here the crowd was divided – one side was supporting what we did and the others were just participating as audience. They said that this locality was doomed because we were beating someone as dangerous as Mujayat .

RD: They were afraid?

BD: Yes they were talking out of fear. And then the other side said that we were doing it right. And the beating was going on in my room! Meeradi's room. Meeradi came and was shocked! She was scared that she would get into trouble. So we took him outside and started beating him again. Meanwhile, someone had called the police. So the police came to pick up the men. But we stepped forward and said that we beat up the goons more than the men. I asked them where they were when he was torturing the women. We had

complained to the police many times. No one from the police force came at that time; neither from the police nor from the Party.

Then they asked us to stop lecturing and take him to the hospital because otherwise all of us would get into trouble with a murder case. So there was someone said “yes go to the hospital”. So while we were taking them to the hospital... their condition was very bad. I was holding Mujayat’s hand, I asked him what he would tell when the doctors and the police questioned him? He asked me what he should say. I told him to say that he was stealing things near the rail line when people caught him, that he was flogged by the public when we rescued him and brought him to the hospital. At that time he had no sense. He said all that.

After that, at 5 am, Haripada Shil sent a car for me. Police came to my house and said that Sir [Dr Smarajit Jana, DMSC) was calling me. I was very scared. I thought that what if only I got into trouble. I went there and asked him what was the matter was. He shouted, “What is the matter! You have taken law in your own hands. Have you got the news of Mujayat’s death?!” I was shocked. I told him (Shil) what could we do. We had complained several many times. Written letters. The police could not catch him (Mujayat)

Oh there is another story. There was a constable called Bhagawan Singh. Humayan Kabir was the SDPO (sub divisional police officer?) then. At that time I came across very good people in the administration. If these people were not there then I could never have done all what I did. So when I told Humayan Kabir he said that it was all right. Whenever they went to carry out a raid, Bhagawan Singh would come in with another officer – in uniform. This was inevitable. It was like a sign for Mujayat and his men. This was a signal that there would be a raid. We could not understand. I am talking about the time before this beating incident of Mujayat. Bhagawan Singh was a constable – a lower level police. He used to take bribes from ujayat. When we told SDPO Humayan Kabir, he said that he would carry out the raids secretly, nobody would know. But I noticed that whenever there is a raid, Bhagawan Singh would wear his uniform and do a round in our locality. Something struck me. I told everyone – and asked them whether they have noticed this ‘coincidence’. Whenever there is a raid Bhagawan Singh would come. Then everyone agreed that there was something fishy. All of us felt like that this was a signal to Mujayat to flee before the raid.

I told Haripada Shil about Bhagawan Singh. Haripada Shil asked me whether I was telling the truth. Then he called Bhagawan Singh and asked him why he came to our locality in the morning. Bhagawan Singh said that it was because he had some duty there. Haripada Shil asked him not to enter that area again. Bhagwan Singh got very angry and almost beat me up. When Haripada Shil told him all this, Bhagawan Singh attacked me and abused me. I told him that if he could show me his rage I could very well do the same. I got this courage because I knew that the OC was an honest and upright man. I reported Bhagawan Singh and he was suspended. Then he threatened me – said that he would “take care” of me when he came back. I told him not to show me these empty threats. Now that fresh raids were being carried out, Mujayat disappeared from the scene completely.

Then I was called. I was quiet and asked him what I could do. Then sir said that I should write down whatever he said. I was a little scared – after all he was a police officer – what would he make me write! I saw Mujayat’s father standing there – he was completely drunk. And then Mujayat’s boys started coming in one by one. I was beginning to get scared. Then

sir asked me how I could escape from the clutches of these men! Later on I understood that he was just creating suspense. Then he made me write – a huge note with many difficult words like ‘kukkhyato’(infamous). Then he gave that writing to all the newspapers.

At that time I did not think so much about where the writing would go and all these things about newspapers and all. I knew nothing of this. I was very tense because Mujayat was dead and I was worried about the trouble that I could get into. Now when I went outside the police station, that boy called Patal told me that the people in the locality were very scared. They were blaming me for everything and abusing me. They were scared about Mujayat’s men coming into our locality and attacking us. So I told Patal to tell everyone in the locality to fill sacks with stone chips and place them on their roofs. We did not have any weapons – but we could at least defend ourselves with this. Now all the young ones in my locality collected stones and readied the sacks. We closed the gates by 6 pm and went to the terraces! I was late because I was writing all this in the police station. When I was going out, Haripada Shil asked his men to drop me home in the car.

When I was going out, I saw Mujayat’s mother standing there. She asked me whether my name was Bharati. I said yes. Then she said that I must have been someone close to her in her previous life. I was a little taken aback! I asked them why. Mujayat’s father was also there – he was crying so much! He said that he did not know what blessing to ask for me from Allah because I had killed Mujayat. He said that he was so happy that his son had died that he would bless me. He said that he wanted someone to kill him. For a father – just think to what extent he was troubled – to say these words. He was weeping inconsolably. Then he saw the police and let go of my hand. So I went away and saw that the gate (of our locality) was closed! I asked them to open the gates. I saw that all of them were ready with their sacks! They were scared of Mujayat and his boys – if some of them came back. Anyway... after two days, the other two boys also passed away. Three were dead and one had survived. And then...

RD: And what happened...

BD: No, the article was published.

RD: Oh.. that he was antisocial...

BD: Yes

RD: And what about the women beating him up?

BD: No.. umm... it was written that there was a public lynching by the residents of the red light area. Who would they identify like this? So the article was published in this manner. So now, I saw in the morning that the *didis* from Sonagachi were coming into our area one by one. It was about 10 am in the morning. I took a bath and had just sat down with a cup of tea when someone called Pushpa said, “Oh my, what have you done! Everybody is saying that this is what is called an organisation and unity!” I was like, oh no! Now the people from the office will come and tell me that I had beaten up that man to death! It created a little suspense. So I asked her why she was telling me this. She asked me if I had seen the newspaper or not. I asked them to get Anandabazar from the liquor shop – they took this

paper. Then I saw that the article was in our support! So that was it. Now the chap who had survived, when he was being discharged from the hospital, that day he (Mujayat's friend) called me to the hospital. I was thinking whether I should go or not. What if I went to the hospital and it turned out to be an ambush by their people! But then everyone in my locality said that they would also go with me. The boys in the tea shop – Mushtaq and others – they knew these people. So I also told them that I was going to the hospital and they said it was ok if I went. So I went there. And this man told me that he would never enter our locality again. He would leave all his antisocial activities. He said that even he had a wife and children, and he would change himself. Then he wanted some clothes so that he could go home. So we gave him clothes (lungi) and then he went away. But meanwhile Mujayat's friends were very angry. They were just waiting to react. So for three months or so everything was all right. Nothing happened. After about three months, Debjani Banerjee was the doctor at that time. It was 1998, our clinic had already started.

RD: From Durbar?

BD: Yes from Durbar. So I was working at the clinic when suddenly two of Mujayat's friends stood in front of me. They stood there and asked me that who would come to rescue me if they hit me with acid right there.

RD: These were goons?

BD: Yes. Mujayat's boys. I did not know all of them. So I asked why and they asked me if I had already forgotten all about Mujayat. I said that if they had problems with me they should throw acid at me and not at the doctors or the patients in the clinic. So I told them this and added that if they really wanted to throw acid they should do that after the clinic hours were over! So an argument started. Then Debjani gathered courage and asked them to leave. She just asked them to get out of the clinic and talk about all this later on. After that they did not come return. But they would appear every now and then, here and there. Sometimes they would also come with bombs. So almost a year passed by like this. After one year, this tension started to go away gradually. After this, there was no Mujayat. And then the organisation (Durbar) also strengthened.

RD: And what about the organisation?

BD: What was good about the organisation was that all of us could get together and protest. This was very important. There are many incidents – how many can I tell you about! There are many incidents where we got full support from the organisation. Also in movements which I participated, the support, what should I say... the faith that I would get the support of another thousand people was what gave me the courage to come so far. In the beginning, I was getting the support of 200 people and I realised that I would get the support of 2000 people! I realised that if I was not wrong, and if I could protest against wrong, I could get support. This faith, this idea – this came to me after being part of the organisation. Earlier it was like – whenever I went forward to protest, I had to think about who would support me. All fights cannot be won alone. But this thing about having 2000 women behind me, 2000 people from the office ... at that time I did not know the Sirs too well, so their support did not occur to me. But the idea that Durbar was behind me in all that I did gave me the courage and support to do so many things.

RD: The biggest problem for you was these goons, right? Their attacks?

BD: Yes. The biggest. And it was easier for them because our locality was right beside the rail line.

RD: Is this the same problem in all red light areas?

BD: This kind of violence and injustice is there – also police, politicians. At the time when we joined the organisation, it was started in 1995 (I joined in 1997), I am talking about the violence and the injustice prevalent at that time. This kind of torture was happening everywhere. Yes, now it is like.. yes. I am going to the last story. So Mujayat and all those troubles were over for us. Then came the time for the elections. Myatha was Tarrit Poddar's (a CPM MP's) special man. He had a lot of tasks assigned to him for the elections. He used to work for the CPM Party. So now Myatha could enter the locality again.

RD: Oh so that same thing again

BD: Yes. So we held meetings with everyone, also the local police station and took a few decisions. Suddenly one day, two or three men came from their side and said that they wanted to sit down and discuss a few things with us because the elections were coming. We were used to this because it happened everytime. I don't remember if this was the Bidhan Sabha or the Lok Sabha vote. So they came and told us that they had a request to make. They said that they had come as brothers to make one request. So we asked them what they wanted. They said that what they were asking was for everyone's well being, they wanted to bring Myatha back into the locality. Everyone was there and nobody could start shouting or anything; some wanted him to return and some did not.

RD: Which year was this?

BD: I think most probably it was 2001. I can't remember which vote this was. Municipality vote... there was some vote. This vote was in May. Then I told them that whatever everyone wanted that would happen. The decision could not be taken solely on the basis of my opinion or the sex workers' opinion – the other people in the locality also had a say. But if he entered the locality he had to behave himself. We had gone through a lot of trouble and we did not want any more of this. All of us, the women said this. So they agreed. Even Myatha was standing there. So everything was all right.

Then the vote ended. On the day of the vote, a fight started between members of Trinamul and CPM. The men from Trinamul threw a bomb which landed on a man from the Congress. He was a driver. He was spot dead. So Myatha made a big thing out of this issue. Earlier, during the Pujas he used to earn a lot of money.. lakhs. I had told them at that point that all this would not be allowed. During the Pujas coupons of Rs 5 coupons would be handed out and the women would happily take customers. That way everyone would be happy, the customers were also happy with this arrangement. They said that the coupon system was way better than all the in-fighting for money the men did. So this was the system. Now these things had to stop otherwise how would they profit.

So they changed their argument – they said that I was TMC. The man who died – this is such a strange story – it was then that I understood the political dynamics. He was the

chairman's driver, his name was Shyamapada Ray. He was neither Congress nor CPM nor anything. He was made into a man from CPM. And they said that people from Trinamul had murdered a man from CPM. Then it became a huge issue – thousands of people came to the funeral of this man whom nobody knew! They took out rallies, silent marches and what not! And they fabricated the story in such a way that I was the one who engineered this whole thing. Then it all started again. They wouldn't talk to me.

Then there was another incident which I remember now... actually there are so many stories of Talpukur! What do I tell you! I mean, when the clinic started there, there was no place for the clinic. There was just one room with a little fencing. This room was taken for the clinic and the inauguration was done by Partha De. He was the health minister at that time. I had told the minister that there was a place where the local boys doped and gambled – so what if we turned that place into a clinic. At that time Partha De said that this was a good idea and told his men, the local CPM people, if they could set up a clinic there. So we took that place over and made a clinic. Nobody could say anything because this happened from the ministry level.

Then we thought that we would set up a school for children. So the talks started about the school and we were looking for a place. So there was no space for this school. We had makeshift arrangements – this person's balcony today, that person's tomorrow – this was how we carried on. There were so many children, it was very difficult, especially during the monsoons. Suddenly one day. One of the girls in our locality told me that there was a place called Buri'r Bagan – we could take that place. I asked her where this place was. She said that it was near the jungle. I asked her who owned that place. She asked people and then got to know that the place belonged to nobody. An old woman used to stay there. She had no heirs, so after her death, that property was just lying there. Then I thought that this could be a good place to set up the school. Somehow, the men got the wind of my plans. Once they got to know, they wanted to get hold of that land immediately. I also got to know of their plan.

I decided that we had to take that plot. If they got hold of it before me, they would turn it into a clubhouse and then our troubles would increase! Immediately I went to the office and asked Bachhuda to give me Rs 3000. He asked what I wanted to do with the money. I told him that there was a plot which I wanted to take over for the school. He was taken aback. He asked me if there would be any problems or not but I just told him to leave it to me. So Bachhuda sent Rs 3000 to me through Putul. So I went there and told my boys that we had to take over a plot of land.

It was quite a big space – full of outgrowth and snakes and all. Who would clear the space? At first everyone was afraid of the snakes there. Now, this boy called Khoka (I spoke about him earlier) and some other boys – these boys used to drink a lot – I told them that I would buy them as much alcohol as they wanted if they cleared the area. I told them that I would buy booze for them but not let them drink because if they drank they would do no work and my plot would remain as it was! I said that they could drink to their heart's content, I would pay the money, but the plot had to be cleared! So at night, they cleared that entire area – it was about 2.5 katthas – or more – I do not know exactly. So that space was cleared. At night, we fixed bulbs there, planted bamboo sticks and took over that plot!

Next morning, the men who wanted to take over the space were so disappointed! They asked around how this had happened. There was a boy from the tea shop, Anwar, who told

them that I was the one who got the boys and took over the plot at night. At that time few people knew Durbar's name. It was not so famous back then. They said that Bharati had taken over the plot. They were very angry. They said that how could Bharati just take over this plot, is it her father's property? But they didn't say anything openly at that time.

Meanwhile, a blood donation camp was being organised near the market. A lot of important people had come there – ministers and all. They said that they were very happy that sex workers had come together and organised themselves. They said that for so long, none of the political parties or anyone had done anything for the welfare of the sex workers. They said that they were very happy that we had come together and worked for the education of our children.

Now this hurt the ego of people like Myatha who had only looked after their own profits from pimping in this locality. He got very angry and went and discussed the matter with others. Meanwhile, we went to the freshly cleared plot with Bachhuda and put fences there. Somehow, we managed to set up a room there. It was difficult because the bamboo was not able to hold the roof. Anyway, somehow we did this.

Then, what will I tell you! It was a Sunday. Clinics and everything were closed. I was cooking. Sheela came to me and said that some people from the Party were calling me downstairs. She was so scared that she couldn't even tell me that there were about a 150 people waiting for me! People from the Party, the club, local goons – all of them were there 100-150 people. I told Sheela to tell them I would come down after cooking. She said that she wouldn't go.

I wondered why she was behaving like this. So I went down the stairs. They were standing near the Shiv Mandir. I got down and saw that there were about a 150 people! I asked them what the matter was. I asked Gulab da what the matter was and he said that Sunil da would speak. He was the commissioner. I was speaking quite softly.

This man threatened me. He asked me what I thought of myself and why I was occupying land and whether I had plans of taking over the entire locality. Then he told me that he wanted me to leave the locality in three days. He said that they would come back after three days and when they came back they wanted to see me gone. I asked them why. He said that I was going beyond the Party and doing these things. I said that I had never done anything wrong. I had done something so that the children could study. Moreover, a minister had approved of the place for the clinic! They said that all this did not matter and I could not stay in that locality anymore. I said I would see and they left.

I also came up to my room. But then they returned and beat up whoever they found. Men and women. Manju's mother told me that they were beating up people. So I went down and all the people of my locality were abusing me. All of them were against me in fear. They said that they had been beaten up because of me. This had never happened before. All of them blamed me for it. I couldn't say anything because they had been beaten up. I couldn't even go to the police station because they wouldn't let me go there. Not the ones who came to threaten me but my own neighbours.

I made up a story about going to take a bath at someone's place and went to the police station. I went through the rail line, to Titagarh and took a rickshaw to the police station from there. I went to the station and told Gautam da everything. He asked me who did all

this and I told him that the local goons, the Party people were there. Myatha was there. He was shocked to hear that Myatha had started his antics all over again. I told him that we had warned everyone about Myatha earlier but nobody had listened to us at that time. So then there was a raid and these goons ran away. But after that threats started coming through phone calls. I started getting murder threats. I told the people in the office. They tried to sort things. What a time it was! So this went on for four or five months.

RD: Were you able to run the school?

BD: Yes. So this went on for four or five months after which they started politics against me. They said that I had two options – I had to leave either Talpukur or Durbar. I said that I would leave none. They said that I had to. I asked them why. They said that after joining Durbar I had become more of a ‘goon’ or I would have to leave Talpukur so that they could get back to all the injustice and the torture that they inflicted on people. These were the Party people. The Party people were using the club people to do all this. They came up front for the first time that day. They were making Myatha and his men do all this.

RD: They were telling you to leave Durbar or Talpukur?

BD: Yes. They were the ones. The women in my neighbourhood were also divided on this issue. One group asked me to leave so that they could live in peace and the other group wanted me to stay because they felt that if these people could drive me out, then they would have to chance to stand up against these goons. I said that I would not leave. So this went on for about three months. Suddenly one evening they called me to the Party office. I asked them who was calling me and they said that someone had come downstairs and was waiting for me. He would take me to the Party office. I said that I would comb my hair and go. What can I say! I combed my hair and went down. They did not even let me speak. They started beating me up. They beat me up very badly. They got the women of their houses to come and beat me – for example Myatha’s wife and others. All of them were sex workers. Somehow I managed to escape and I ran to Jhantuda’s house. Jhantuda was the Local Committee Member (LCM) of that area. Jhantuda was not at home, he had gone to some meeting. I told his wife that I had protested against wrongs and now I had become the villain. I told her how they had beaten me up. She asked me who had beaten me up. I said that it was all planned. Jhantuda also had a part to play in this – I said whatever I felt like. She asked me to go to the police station but I said that I would not go anywhere.

Those who beat me up (Myatha’s people) did not know that I had gone to Jhantuda’s house. They thought that I had gone to the police station. They thought I had taken the road to the police station but actually I had taken the other road. They could not find me, so they broke all the lights in the neighbourhood. I had to come back from Jhantuda’s house! Everything was dark.

I came to the clinic straight from Jhantuda’s house. There was a person in the clinic who asked me to get back to my house. I asked why. This person said that they would all come and beat me up again. I said that was ok. At that point I had become very stubborn and angry. So I made phone calls from there. Dilipda, Laji di all of them went, a FIR was lodged and everything was done. They were caught but were released the next day. Once they

were released, they came again with broken bottles and asked me to come out. I thought that it would not be wise to go out because I would get beaten up again.

Then Bacchuda sent two men for my protection – one of them was Sujit. I told them to go away because this was a neighbourhood problem. They would only give duty till 6 pm. What would happen after that? These people could come anytime! These guards would not stay up all night. So I sent them away. They still tell me that they have not forgotten my courage from those days!

RD: What were the local people doing?

BD: All of them had turned against me. The men turned against me and went over to Myatha's side. Many of them were already with Myatha – they had come to us because Myatha was gone. Once Myatha came they returned to him. The women had no option – they were thinking that if these people could do this with me, they could do anything with them. Some women openly told me that if I left there would be peace so I should go away. But others asked me not to go because if I went their condition would worsen. But they couldn't come to me directly and tell this. They were so scared. So this went on, I said that I would not leave. This went on and on. At one point it became almost impossible for me to stay there. They kept on abusing me. There is a limit to what one can tolerate! Still I did not leave. I went to the clinic and came back like a criminal – whenever I went out they hurled abuses at me. I used to feel very insulted and think of the past when none of this happened. And when the women also turned against me I felt very bad – for whom had I gone through all of this? So this was going on. They couldn't drive me out from the locality. Then my son came to visit me from his hostel in Rakhapur, Rampurhat. Rakhi Purnima was on 27th, this was in 2002.

The day before there was a big meeting at the office against the people who harassed me. The next day my son came. They carried out a raid that night and caught my son. They accused him of raping a 14 year old girl and stealing Rs 10 lakh. Police came to my house. Haripada Shil was no longer there. This was Paresh Ray. Horrible man. He came and told me what my son was accused of. I just asked him if it was possible for a 14 year old boy to rape a 14 year old girl, steal money and then come and sleep peacefully beside his mother! But they dragged my son out of bed and took him away. This was from the Party.

I called up Bachhuda in the morning. Now I think about how mad I was back then. At that time it did not strike me that I should go to Rajib, a classmate who had become a lawyer. He was in Barrackpore court. Anyway, Bachhuda sent me to Ramaladi, Subhash Chakravarty's (a very senior CPM leader) wife. He said that Ramaladi knew very good lawyers. It was the same guy. Ramaladi sent me to this man. His name was Rajkrishna – I did not know that.

Anyway, my son had been put into jail. He didn't even know that he would be put in jail. He was only 14 years old. Sandhya di was there. She told him that he would get to eat with his mother. It was almost 6 pm. At that time the lawyer asked me why I did not come to him earlier. I told him that it did not strike me at all! And moreover, I did not even know that he was called Rajkrishna! Then he said that they would keep my son in jail for 14 days now that they had put him in once. There was nothing that we could do. So my 14 year old son stayed in custody for 14 days. He had a friend who came with him. They had come to have a good time for a holiday.

RD: Where did they get the girl?

BD: Their girl. Sheela had gone over to Myatha's side – they took Sheela's sister's daughter and made her pretend to be the victim. Anyway I didn't have the heart to go and meet my son – he asked me when he could come home. I just told him that I would take him home the next day because court was closed that day. He was crying inconsolably. Sandhyadi, Sumitra – all those who were there were crying. I did not go near him. Anyway, Putul and the others somehow managed to feed him. That place was full of grown men and goons – he was scared to stay there. So my son had to stay there for 14 days.

This was in Barrackpore Court. The day he was caught I did not return home. Bachhuda said – and also Angura – she was the Secretary (DMSC) at that time. They asked me not to go back home that day because I had to stay alone. So they asked Swapna to take me to her house. Back then this office was not there, there was just one office. So I went into the office and sat in front of Bacchuda. Immediately I was down with high fever. I was so tense and worried that I did not know what was happening to me. Then the pain also started. I had such a pain in my stomach that no matter what I did it would not go away. My son was still in jail. So I went to the doctor and got admitted to R.G Kar and they said that there were stones in my stomach and that I had to go in for an operation.

RD: Gall stones?

BD: Yes. There were no seats and nothing, I was being given saline and on top of it all my son was in jail. Moreover, I have a nephew to him I am almost like a parent – he has also grown up. And his friends were asking him where his brother was. He said that his brother had come from the hostel; some boys had fled from the hostel. He said that the police took his brother because they did not know the address of the boys who had escaped. He couldn't say anything else because he knew that it was a bad thing – being in jail.

Meanwhile I was fighting my pain in the hospital while my son was in jail. My nephew was running around a lot – he had to go and see my son and then come and see me. Sandhyadi told my son the truth about my sickness. There was another thing about where my son was on that day. They showed that the incident happened on 27th and they filed the case on the 29th. They themselves did not have a clue about what they were doing. The lawyers saw this and told us. Anyway, we had to get the certificate from his hostel that he studied there and that he was there on that day.

So I went with Sandhyadi and got the certificate. This was before my pain started. The headmaster was very fond of him. He asked why my son was not coming back from the holiday. So I said that he had been diagnosed with jaundice and had to take rest for three months. I did not go in front of the headmaster. He asked where I was and said that if there was any problem about studies or something he would take responsibility for my son because he was such a good student. Sandhyadi came crying and told me what the principal had said. My son had told her that come what may, she had to get him released on the day of my operation.

So after 14 days my son was released. He was released on the day before my operation. Then my operation got over. But the thing was that after they took away my son, I left that locality. After they took him away he did not speak to me for about a year and a half. He was very upset. His studies got jeopardised. He was in Class 10. I could not get him admitted anywhere. They did not take him into any school – not even in private schools. He could not even sit for the tests. He had a friend who knew that he was in jail. So he could not go back to his old school. I asked him to go and he said that if he went back his friend Subal would tell everyone that he had been to jail. He said that if this happened he would commit suicide. Then I didn't push it any more. His studies got completely jeopardised.

RD: so he studied till class 10. I want to know about the other incident. Did your son live in a hostel or was he with you after that?

BD: No I put him in the hostel when he was in Class 5. This was the Malharpur hostel. Boys stayed there and carried on their studies. It was a school and a hostel. On one side there was the school and on the other there was the hostel. Malharpur. Rampurhat. I used to go every month, give him money. I had to pay Rs. 900 per month.

RD: But he couldn't bear the shock?

BD: No he couldn't. Ishikadi was there with us at that time. She tried to counsel him and all. He just said one thing repeatedly – that Durbar was more important for me than him. I had destroyed his life for the sake of Durbar.

RD: Why did he think this?

BD: He thought this because he had to go to jail without any fault of his. He kept saying that if I hadn't fought with them – it was ok that I fought for everyone – but what had I done for him? He said that his life was over because of this.

RD: He understood that they targeted him?

BD: Yes. But later he understood the whole thing. Now he understands because he has grown up.

RD: What does he do now?

BD: Right now he does nothing. I was talking about his eye operation. His eye has a big problem. Now he is not doing anything. Earlier he was working with HCR.

RD: Where do you stay now?

BD: I stay in Naihati. The property got divided there after mother died. That is another story. I did not go to that house for a long time. Never went back after giving that exam.

RD: You did not fall in love again?

BD: No... Actually... the thing about love is... earlier I told you that thing. When I came to Talpukur at first I fell in love with someone. Everything was all right. That man was also very good – he had no faults. But, I left him for one thing. He stood there in front of Myatha, slapped me and told me that there was no point in staying in the water and fighting with the crocodiles. Means that I was living there so why was I fighting with Myatha. It hurt my sentiment. The slap. So I left him. After that Bachhuda tried to get us back together – he told me to let go of my anger because he was a very good man. But I did not yield.

RD: Don't you have any regrets?

BD: No. What about regrets ... nothing like that. I had always wanted to live independently. I am independent since I was sixteen. I was never under anyone. I was never subject to someone else's will and still am not. Even today my two sons –

RD: Do you have two sons?

BD: No – but the other boy is my sister's son – he is older. He is married and has children now. But still they do not tell me what to do or what not to do. Never. I have tried to do my best for them. They live their own lives. My son had fallen in love and he married the girl. The girl has passed her MA. I have gotten her admitted to RICE. She has an exam on the 13th – so she cannot go with us. She is also trying to get my son into some business or something. They haven't had a child yet. My nephew has a son. That is my grandson.

RD: What about a job for your son?

BD: I am trying to get some business running for him so that he can work from home. His eye is not good – which is why something from home would be ideal. Let us see what can be done.

RD: Do you still do full time sex work?

BD: No.

RD: Have you left?

BD: No I have not left but I do not do it full time. I don't do it like that anymore. If my old friends call me then it is ok. I don't go out on the streets and seek customers. I don't even get the time. There is no time. Actually when I first joined – in 1998 I became a peer educator. In 1997 I became a Secretary.

RD: You became a Secretary in 1997 and then became a peer educator?

BD: Yes. And the clinic started in 1998. There I became the Peer Educator. Then I became the Assistant Supervisor, then Clinic Attendant, then I worked as a sister, then a full Supervisor. Then after the problems I came here in 2003 – I mean at the end of 2002. I left Talpukur and joined this office. So here I did work for the organisation.

RD: So then you did not get time for sex work?

BD: No. Also I did not know these places too well at that time. Now I don't even go to that area – not even hotels or things like that. Then when I came here I became the coordinator of the Sonagachhi project. I was the Coordinator of the Sonagachi project for three years. Then I became the Director. I was the Director for five years. Then I became the Secretary.

RD: Do you miss sex work? I mean the regular –

BD: - Yes that was what I was about to say. After getting involved in this work it sometimes feels like the days of fun – joking around and talking to everyone – that time is forever gone. It is not there anymore. All day I am bogged down with work. Sometimes I feel bad. When I go to Sonagachi nowadays – I talk to the girls, go to customer care – then I feel very happy to talk to the girls. I feel good. I like that life. But after coming here I can't access that life that frequently. On one hand, there is some regret but on the other hand there is pride on becoming someone in my life. So there are two sides.

RD: What part of that life do you miss the most?

BD: From that life – the jocularity, freely mixing with people, having a good time with friends – those things are gone. I do not have time for those things anymore. Here I have to conduct meetings after meetings and by the time this gets over it is 7 o'clock! So after that I don't feel like meeting my friends and having fun. I think about that some times. But at the same time I have accepted this – we need to do these things as well. They are important. We want to create our own position – and if we are not willing to work hard for it then it will never happen. I have to think about both sides. There is a lot of pride in the work I am doing.

RD: Yes, of course. You are doing very important work.

BD: Yes and I always had a dream from when I was a child – to be independent, to pick up a bag and go to work... I had seen one of my aunts... my father used to beat my mother a lot. We had a lot of problems. So he used to beat her a lot. I used to see that and think that husbands beat wives. So I decided from that time that I would not get married. From that age I thought that it was best to be independent and not to be dependent on anyone. That was there. But now, sometimes, I think that as people age they require a support. Sometimes I think of that. But then again I think that I will take things as they come.

RD: Does your son ever ask you why you did sex work or something like that? Your daughter in law?

BD: No she does not know.

RD: Your daughter in law does not know?

BD: No she does not know. It has been one year since they got married.

RD: Was it a love marriage or an arranged marriage?

BD: A love marriage. I did not want this. They eloped and got married. The girl's family had decided to get her married elsewhere but she eloped. They got married on their own. Then the people from my office went to Kalighat and got them married. That was another episode! I was in Siliguri at that time. Anyway, the thing is that my daughter in law is still studying. I am sponsoring her education.

RD: Very good. But she doesn't know that you –

BD: - No, not like that. But there was a program in Tara News (Bengali TV channel) where they wanted my life history. There was something on TV about life stories. This was about people doing important things in their lives those facing a lot of difficulties. So she watched that program. After watching the program she asked my son. My son told her not to ask any questions about this. So she did not say anything.

RD: Ok. Very intelligent girl.

BD: Yes –

RD: - You were saying that you take customers sometimes even now. Do you earn well from that?

BD: Yes – it is for earning only – earlier it was like the men who used to come, I am not in touch with them.

RD: Why didn't you keep in touch with them?

BD: Didn't keep in touch because at that time I was going through a lot of things. I did not manage to keep in touch. I had been fighting continuously for three years. Even now I get goosebumps when I think about those years. So even now if anyone is not serious enough about the work of the organisation I feel very irritated. I feel angry. It is not for this that we fought so much! So if that happens I feel bad. But otherwise I am fine. Now – especially after becoming the Director – there are a lot of people from colleges, universities – who try to come. Principals, lecturers. But nowadays I do not go. There are just two people. One is a lecturer of Jadavpur College – sorry – university. And the other one is retired.

RD: They pay you well?

BD: Yes. Yes – like some days they pay me about Rs 3000 – 4000. I don't get time. Only sometimes. And the man – even he does not get time.

RD: Yes but you are quite famous –

BD: - No but they already know that I am a sex worker.

RD: - Yes but it is like you are Bharati from Durbar –

BD: - But I don't go like that. And even if people see me I do not have any problem.

RD: - No you don't have a problem but don't the men have a problem?

BD: No they know everything.

RD: He knows but other people don't –

BD: No that situation has never occurred. Actually in hotels – I have never gone to hotels – so I don't know those people. And if I run into anyone they just greet me – from office or anything – they don't go ahead and tell people that I was in Titagarh and all that. They do not even talk to the man. They just talk to me and go away. I don't know what they think later on but at that time they say nothing.

RD: Right. These two are regular -

BD: Not regular

RD: It is like a friendship, you have a companion.

BD: Yes. But sometimes I think what will happen in future.

RD: Have you become attached to them?

BD: That happens with one person. Not with everyone.

RD: Do you have someone like that?

BD: Me – just the one I told you about. That is why I don't mix with the others so much anymore.....

RD: Let us get back to Durbar. Right now, what do you think is Durbar's biggest strength?

BD: The first thing I will say is that – well – media.

RD: You have fought a lot. Now – you have crossed a lot of debates, fights, struggles – where do you think Durbar stands now?

BD: The first thing is the support of the people. The second is media advocacy. Nowadays we do not even have to go to them and let them know. Earlier, we had to go to the media. But now they come and ask us about what programs we have and all that. So this is there. We have come a long way in 10 years. The new trade unions and everything – what we are able to do today we could not do 10 years ago. We have a lot more support and human resource right now. For example, the Supreme Court and the Parliament – the struggle we had with ITPA law in the Parliament – there were 39 members of the Standing Committee who sent a letter to the Women and Child Department saying that the ITPA law came from them but certain parts had to be deleted and they had to decide that after sitting and discussing with DMS. This is the Supreme Court.

As for rehabilitation, Supreme Court has said clearly that for sex workers' rehabilitation in West Bengal, DMS and Usha, our Usha Bank, are given responsibility. Rehabilitation does not mean taking every girl and rehabilitating them. Rehabilitation is only for girls who want it. And for those who do not want rehabilitation, there have to be arrangements so that they can live peacefully and with dignity. This is the Supreme Court's order. And almost every month, not almost but every month, there are planning meetings in Delhi. I am one of the five people in the Supreme Court panel.

RD: Great. Bharatidi, you have participated in so many struggles. From the struggles within a family to becoming a sex worker, then your struggles before you joined Durbar; then the struggles for Durbar. Now you have a position, now you are well respected. What do you feel like when you look back on your life?

BD: When I look back I think of two things. One, I feel that I have achieved some of my dreams and desires. For example independence – I have got that fully. Secondly, I have always wanted to be on the right side. I think that here I am on the right. Be it in work, or struggles or anything... till date... I have tried to be honest and right. And I think I have achieved that. I also feel like I am doing something that is important. This thing about being independent and not being dependent on abusive husbands – this I know I have done. I have never liked all that and I never wanted to suffer like that. In this aspect I am very happy.

There is one more thing – which our sir says – that there is one thing which we have to understand. This thing about the Supreme Court, about the Parliament, my being in the Panel – these are things I had never thought about. I had never thought about it. Not even as a Director or a Secretary. Not before that. I knew that I was independent. But I had never thought that I would come to this level, talk to such people, conduct meetings and everything. I had never thought about this. These things were beyond my imagination. This I have received from Durbar.

RD: Your confidence has also increased.

BD: Absolutely.

RD: What I have seen of you before and what I see now – there has been an increase in confidence.

BD: Two things. Confidence and also my emotions and self respect. Like I told you that story about the man I liked – I am unable to tolerate certain things. If I am wrong and you tell me I will quietly listen and agree. But when I am not wrong I don't like to listen to things.

Another good thing is going to different places. I have been to 14 or 15 countries. From 1999 till now I visit somewhere every year. I had never thought of this. This had been beyond my imagination--that I will get on to a plane and talk to foreigners, meet them, give my opinions in places like America – I had never even thought about that. But I have been able to do all this after I joined Durbar. So my personal life – from childhood till the time I came to Durbar – that was not very positive. I had come out of my own accord.

RD: You had seen the woman going to work with a bag. But you have achieved a lot more.

BD: Yes I had never imagined this. I had never thought of the latter part of my life – that there will be something called Durbar and that I would be a part of it. Then I joined, I fought, I struggled, went to jail... my son went to jail. That I would surpass all of that and reach this stage was also something I never imagined. This is beyond what I had expected from my life. I had never thought of this – that I would get into a plane and go abroad.

Also that I would have something to do with the Supreme Court. Sir is in the panel – he can be there – he is a man of another level. But me being there – one out of the five members – I had never thought about that. Last year I went to Geneva for the International Convention. I am also a member of the International Network, APN. And last year there was a presentation on sex workers in Bangkok. And for that – there is someone called Andrew there – the leader of the network – he said that I had to make the presentation in English. I said how could I do that! Two pages in English! Anyway I had luck on my side that day. Andrew wrote down the presentation for me. The presentation was scheduled at 11 am the next day.

There were many people from India – Soumen Mitra and a lot of others. A lot of people, many ministers. A lot of important people. But I went in and made the presentation easily! I had never thought I could do it! I was worried that it would go wrong. After the presentation... there were people from NACO, Delhi... and also Soumen Mitra... he knew me because he was the SDPO in Barrackpore even before he came to the Women's Commission, he knew about Maytha and my fight with him. He was also there. He came and told me that he could not imagine that I was the same Bharati from Talpukur. I felt very good. When I was struggling with Maytha I was not a peer, not part of the organisation or anything. And then I reached this position. I told him all the details.

And the place from where I was thrown out, I was called there as a Chief Guest in the Blood Donation Camp. In Titagarh.

RD: When was this?

BD: This would be 2006 or 2007. I had recently become the director.

RD: This was after 2002. After they drove you out.

BD: Yes. The other day I was sitting here and telling Sir that I was feeling so good. Sir told me that the time to think about Titagarh had gone. Now I had to think of a thousand Titagarhs. I told him that it was not about Titagarh. But about Tarit Tarafdar. When I was on stage he came up and asked me if I was Bharati and how I was. I told him that I was fine. He invited me to go there one day. And even before this election he called me many times to discuss about the Party. I said I would if I found time. It is good that I did not go. Trinamul won this time! Anyway. These are the things which make me so happy.

RD: At that time they did not support you at all.

BD: Yes at that time they saw everything through Myatha's perspective.

RD: What is Myatha up to now?

BD: Now he is out of that area. He cannot enter that locality anymore. Now even the women there do whatever Durbar says. Now everything is working fine. Now I do not like going there. That incident of getting beaten up, then coming away – that is still instilled in my head. After 2002 I have not entered Titagarh. The girls call me. But I don't want to go. A lot of programs were held there recently. Self Regulatory programs (anti trafficking), they called me. But I don't have the heart to go there anymore. I don't feel like it. If they had not done that to my son maybe I could still go. But I get angry whenever I even look at them.

RD: Your son's case is over?

BD: Over... means... I have spoken to my lawyer. He has said that there is nothing to do right now. The lawyer who was dealing with this –

RD: It has been about six – seven years now.

BD: - Yes. This happened in 2002. So they told me now that I should just let it be. If they dig it up again then we will see. I got hold of the certificate copy or whatever you call it and showed the testimony to my lawyer. The lawyer said that they could not do anything with that case because there were discrepancies. They said that the rape happened on 27th, then they lodged the case two days before that – so it is all jumbled up. So the lawyer, Tarunda said just let it be.

RD: And what about the woman you stayed with in Naihati?

BD: She is dead. Her daughter, son in law etc are there. Sometimes I go to the market there with my son on his bike. Then I meet them sometimes. And talk to them. They invite me. But I do not go there. Actually when I leave a place I find it very difficult to go back. There was a curiosity there about what I did and all that. So after I left the house I never had the desire to go back. If they had asked me directly whether I was a sex worker or not I would not have been so angry with them. But this suppressed interest and all this I could not tolerate. Similarly, I do not want to enter Titagarh. If I had really committed a crime then I would have gone back. Now the ones who had beaten me up that day call me. I hear from the other girls that they say that after they beat me up I got a promotion! Now look at her – she rides a plane and all – she has reached such as position! Now they are jealous of me. They can't take this. When there are shows on TV where I am, our people tell them look its Bharati! They get jealous. I enjoy it when I hear these things. When my enemies get jealous I quite like it. At the spur of the moment I might feel anger but later on I think that this is what was destined to happen.

RD: It was great talking to you Bharati. I had never got the opportunity to sit with you for so long and talk.

BD: When I went to America, then there was a director, I have forgotten the name. So this boy Surja told this director my story. He will make a film on my story. He asked me if I had

any objections to that. Sir was there. He said why should I have any objections. He noted down the whole story. He asked me if Karishma or Kajol would do my role. I think he will come next month. He keeps asking me if I have any objections. I said that there are no objections. They can show whatever has happened, but nothing extra. Then they said if there were any problems with names. But what should be the problem? Myatha knows very well what he did! Shil knows, Paresh Ray knows – everybody knows my story. What problems can there be? About the murder... this murder ... I don't know if they will show this but it does not matter now. There was a meeting about finance. So there my Sir told me to narrate my story. I said everything – also about the murder I committed. Then a lawyer came to me and said I was mad! All this got taped. That was 6 – 7 months after the incident. Then they asked to delete the tape. But then nothing happened. He was just a bit nervous. What if everyone thought that Durbar was involved. But Durbar had nothing to do here. At one point even we were scared.

RD: This was a huge struggle.

BD: There are many incidents. Once there was a raid and the police took over all the liquor shops. This was after the driver's death. We didn't go into that. Durbar hadn't been formed at that time. But after some time the <?> at that point Durbar had started. Then Sudhangshu da and others went. They were not bailed by the Party people. I went there and got them released. Then they started following Durbar! They said that they would do whatever Durbar said. With this the boys came over to our side. But Myatha entered again. Now it is all right. It is nothing to us, but the sex workers' children, their Babus stay in that area – so it is good if the local boys give their support. There are many such incidents. Where the Party could not do things but Durbar did. So they had faith in Durbar. But now the situation has changed completely. Now the Party has changed.

RD: Is it better now?

BD: It has started again. Now we are discussing things. Sonagachi. We have also spoken to the Mayor. We have to get in touch with the higher level of authorities and get things settled. They have already said that if anything wrong happens we can report to them if the lower levels do not work. They have said this openly. There should not be any trouble. But let us see.

RD: OK. Bharatidi, thank you so much. It was great talking to you.

Transcription and translation by Nandita Roy

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