

Begging For a Greater Cause

The Mission of Sindhutai Sapkal

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A beggar woman will be a beggar woman, always. She will beg for the rest of her life. Fifty years ago, she begged on the Manmad-Aurangabad-Nanded railway track. Today she is the proud recipient of more than 30 awards for social work. And yet half a decade later, she continues to beg.

“I was married off by my father when I was only 11. My husband was 30 at that time. The thorny path of life started soon after I entered my in-laws' home. A year after my marriage, I conceived. Then started the abuse at the hands of my in-laws. I didn't have any option but to tolerate the physical and mental abuse to which I was subjected. After all, I was a woman. When I was nine months pregnant, my husband beat and tortured me one night. I lost consciousness. He assumed that I had died. He dragged me to the nearest cowshed and left me there in order to escape the charge of murder. I lay there bleeding profusely. In that condition, I gave birth to a baby girl. When I regained consciousness, a cow in that cowshed was standing over me forming a canopy to protect me. It was licking my newborn. A human had almost killed me, but an animal saved me. I picked up

two stones lying nearby. With one I kept down and with the other I cut the umbilical cord. I embraced the baby and carried it home. I spent the night in front of the house. Morning came and the people of the house noticed me. Having taken me for dead, they were amazed to see me in front

of the house. They drove me away from the village. I thought of killing the baby and myself. But my conscience told me to live for other women like me. From that day onwards, I started begging on the Manmad-Aurangabad-Purna Nanded railway route. I begged for seven years.”

The brave soul, Sindhutai Sapkal, narrated this account of her life whilst accepting the late Kamalatai Rausaheb Jamkar Memorial Award at Parbhani in Maharashtra. Thousands of beggars beg to satisfy their needs. Yet they want to survive. But Sindhutai did not beg just for herself. After leaving her child at the Dagdusheth Halwai Trust at Pune, she begged on behalf of hundreds of orphans, women and the old who were in distress because they lacked support.

In the last 50 years, she has supported 1,050 children and taught them to live full lives. And yet, today, she still begs. At the time she begged in railway coaches, she saw the circumstances of orphans, the old, etc. She experienced their pain. She begged in order to build



Nadarmaay, a home for women in the village of Chikhaldara in the Amravati district of Maharashtra. Abandoned women were given shelter there. Orphaned girls found refuge at the Savitribai Phule home. The listener is moved to tears on hearing Sindhutai narrate the woes of the women housed here.

She has also established the Mamta Bal Sadan at the village of Kumbharvalan in Pune district. Here she has housed several orphans through the proceeds of begging "Somebody had left a baby girl about 10-12 days old on the steps of Mamta Bal Sadan. I found her on the steps the next morning. I named her Karuna Sathe. Someone had thrown a newborn into a 30 foot deep valley to kill it. An *adivasi* who was searching for his lost goat heard the cries of the baby. Some wild animals were trying to kill it. He climbed down the valley and rescued the child. The animals injured him, too. He brought the child to me and told me all about how he found it. I named the child Deepak Sapkal. I name all the girls as Sathe after my maiden surname and all the boys as Sapkal after my husband's surname. Tell me, am I wrong?"

Whilst begging, she noticed the agonies of the aged. Thus she was inspired to establish *Maazi Aai*, a home for the aged at a village known as Sindhuvihar in the *taluka* of Karanj in the Wardha district of Maharashtra. She tells the story of an old couple she brought there: "I saw them travelling. They were telling each other: 'Die before me. In this way your agonies will end faster.' I left the train and approached them. I came to know that their son was an advocate in the Supreme Court at Delhi. Their daughter-in-law maltreated them. She used to quarrel with the husband because she felt her in-laws were a burden. They did not want to be the cause of crisis in the son's household. They quietly left the house. I got them to *Maazi Aai*."

Sindhutai hasn't forgotten the cow that took care of her child and herself at the cowshed. As long as a cow gives milk, it is taken care of. When it stops giving milk, it is left on the streets. The cow roams about in search of food. When it is tired, it sits down. Stray dogs and crows trouble it. To protect the bearer of 33 crores of gods, Sindhutai has started *Gopika Gau Rakshan Kendra* at Sindhivihar. Here, cows left on the street are cared for.

When Sindhutai realised that the number of orphans was increasing, she established the *Gangadharbaba Chhatralaya* at Guha in the Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra. "A judge from the Mumbai High Court, Mr. B. G. Kolse-Patil, has donated 11 acres of fertile land, a well and a house, the total worth of which is about Rs. 50 lakh. Balasaheb Vikhe-Patil had wished to purchase the Kolse-Patil property at a very high price. But Kolse-Patil refused to sell it. He donated it to us. He wished to name this place after the great and saintly social worker Gadgebaba. But I insisted that the place be named after Mr. Kolse-Patil's parents who had worked hard on this land. He agreed. Here, orphaned children are brought up and educated."

Sindhutai has emerged out of a life full of torment and given birth to a huge mountain of social work. It has been 50 years now. People of Manmad have taken note of and

celebrated her work. She was also given awards at Aurangabad and Parbhani. Yet, Sindhutai begs even today. But the nature of begging has changed. Some years back, she begged in the railway coaches. Now she begs at ceremonies where she is felicitated. She has passed only the fourth standard examination at school. Yet, she has written an autobiography called *Vanavasi*. The Karnataka government has accepted this book as part of their syllabus. Four editions of this autobiography have already been sold. Money generated from this book is being used for her institutions. Now, she is ready to write *Vanavasi Two*. The people from the village from which Sindhutai was chased away by her husband have also celebrated her work. Speaking about this, she says, "Night is terrifying, but without it, the day does not dawn. For me, the night is over and now it is day. If my husband had not maltreated me, I wouldn't have done all this. I have forgiven him. I am ready to accept him any time, but as a child or an older person, not as a husband. Now, there is only a mother left in me..." □

This article by Ramanand Vyavahare was translated from Marathi by Ketaki Rajwade, a student of Class 11 in Mumbai. She undertook this translation for Manushi because she was moved and inspired by Sindhutai's life. The original Marathi version appeared in the *Maharashtra Times* on August 16, 2000

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