

# Vidhya Das: Fighting for poor women in India

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Vidhya Das has spent more than three decades studying and sharing the lives of some of India's most marginalised people [Chandrahas Choudhury/Al Jazeera] Kashipur, India - In a large, airy classroom in the village of Kashipur in the eastern Indian state of Odisha, there unfolds a scene rich in contrasts and ironies. A reading and writing class for the five-year-olds of prathama sreni, or first grade, proceeds alongside a parent-teacher meeting. The children are all girls, for this is a primary school run by a local NGO, Agragamee, exclusively for girls from Scheduled Tribe or Scheduled Caste families - those groups, collectively making up about a fourth of India's population, marked out by the Indian constitution as in need of special assistance from the state. But even the parents present are mostly mothers.

All in the room are barefoot, as is the rule, but only some have left slippers at the door.

Kashipur lies in Rayagada, one of India's poorest districts. Two-thirds of the households here are, in the language of the Indian state, "BPL" or below the poverty line - as indeed, are most of India's 80 million indigenous peoples or "adivasis", no matter where they live. And yet, despite the commonality of background, the contrast between the generations could not be more striking. While the girls rapidly write out the names of animals on to their slates, matching pictures with corresponding words, the women are perplexed by the printed page. When the register of attending parents is passed around, they have to be shown their own names, and then sign with a thumbprint. Their inability to read attests to the dysfunctionality of India's extensive but shambolic state-run primary school system - thought by many respected intellectuals, such as the economist and Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, to be the biggest failing of the Indian state in its seven decades as an independent nation. **'Elder mother'** A hush falls over the room as a diminutive woman in a salwar kameez, her greying hair cut short, smiling but stern, takes off her shoes at the door and enters. For the people of Kashipur, Vidhya Das, 56, is better known as "Bada Maa", or "Elder Mother".

Alongside her husband Achyut Das, with whom she founded Agragamee in 1987, Das has spent more than three decades in this district, studying and sharing the lives of some of India's most marginalised people, and pointing out not just what they have to endure by way of hardships and injustices, but also all that they have to offer. And in contrast to many NGOs in rural areas, which limit their interventions to a single major cause - education, reproductive health, human rights - what stands out about both the Dases is the breadth of their vision and the range of their practice. Das is as an educationist working to produce hundreds of first-generation literates, the creator of skill and leadership programmes for tribal women, and an agriculturist experimenting with organic farming for sustainable livelihoods. She has been a campaigner for the rights of tribal people - standing up to the power of both state and market in protesting against the displacement of tribals by mining companies in one of India's most mineral-rich regions. She has written lucidly and combatively on all these issues in journals and magazines, trying to capture what she calls "the politics of underdevelopment" - the deliberate effort by the state to keep some of its people uneducated and vulnerable, the better to exploit them, their land and their labour. "In India the great irony is that the poor not only have to bear the harsh burden of their own poverty," she says, "they also subsidise the lives of a considerable number of people far better off than them." [The 'real constitution'](#) One glimpse of this hidden reality soon appears in this very room. After a detailed and involved discussion on school - options for further studies for the fifth graders who will pass out in a month's time, ensuring regular attendance - the discussion turns to the role of the women not as parents, but as workers. A small survey is taken of the women's participation in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGA). Established in 2006, this is the largest public works programme in the world. The scheme was designed by the government as a way of building rural infrastructure, staving off migration to the cities, and improving the options of those who would otherwise have no bargaining power for their labour. By the terms of the programme, each household has the right to demand from the government 100 days of work a year (in some of the poorest districts, including Rayagada, 200 days a year) on local public works - the building of roads and bridges, the development of watersheds, the reforestation of village commons - and to be paid a stipulated minimum wage.

At the current minimum wage of Rs226 or \$3.50 a day, 200 days of work would give a household an income of Rs45,200 (about \$700) a year - a small but invaluable foundation for a poor family to build on.



**Vidhya Das with schoolgirls [Chandras Choudhury/Al Jazeera]**

It was envisaged that the works funded by the scheme, being local and requiring no travel, would draw a large number of women into the workforce and reconfigure gender and social dynamics at the rural level.

And so it has: today, more than half the work days in the scheme are claimed by women, when men greatly outnumber women in other kinds of recorded work. "Narega" is today a household word in rural India, a neologism encapsulating both the hope and the mechanism for a more equitable society. And yet, on the ground, the scheme has also generated enormous opportunities for corruption. The extent of this quickly becomes apparent when the women in the room are asked how much they are paid for what they colloquially call "coolie kama" or manual labour under the "narega" scheme. It turns out no one is actually paid more than Rs100 (\$1.50) a day. Being unable to read, they believe what they are told and have no idea what the official wage rate is or even who is actually the source of the works programme to begin with. For many of them, it is a contractor or local leader who has organised the work, and who controls their destiny. They are happy to settle for less than half the state-mandated minimum wage, knowing that if they do not agree to work at this rate, then somebody else will. In effect, the poorest of India's poor work not just to make an income themselves, but to enrich the many levels of government officials and middlemen who make up the system of kickbacks, never to be found on any official records, called the percentage (PC) system. Das points out that as long as the women do not get together to approach the government directly for work with a full awareness of their rights, and are unable to monitor the records on which they affix their thumbprints, the theft will go on. She asks the women to get together in small groups to petition the local public works officer for work, and offers the support of Agramamee staff to help them write their requests. "We believe we live in a country governed by the Indian constitution," remarks Das wryly, "but for many Indians, the PC system is the real constitution of this country." Suddenly, the simple words being read aloud by the children at the back of the room - "dog", "bear", "parrot" - seem to resound with power. Organised resistance "In the 30 years that I have been here," Das says, "Agramamee's work has changed - adapting to the changing times and needs of the tribal communities. But our objective of rights and sustainable livelihoods for tribal communities has remained.

"In the 1980s, when our work had just begun, the main focus was to stop the system of bonded labour that had existed in this region from time immemorial. Men and women who got into debt and could not repay it would have to pledge their labour for an entire lifetime to the debtor. Imagine, in a democracy, human beings were still serving as serfs.

"These efforts resulted in a violent backlash. Achyut was physically attacked and seriously wounded by the landlords. Throughout our work in the tribal regions, we have had to face several kinds of opposition from vested interests, including false propaganda and litigations, threats of violence, ban orders on Agramamee, and so on. I myself have been gheraoed [surrounded] at least three times in my life by an angry mob. But it's a bit easier in these situations if you're a woman. You just look them in the eye and they will not touch you." In the 1990s, Agramamee's efforts to help tribal women claim their rights and learn new skills led to the formation of a local federation of women's self-help groups called "Ama Sangathan", or "Our Gathering", and to a growing awareness of the possibilities of community action and organised resistance. This is an emphasis very particular to Das' thinking: for her, rural women need not limit their focus to "women's issues", but should think of their wider responsibilities as stakeholders in a community and as citizens of a polity.

In an essay from 1991, she criticises a writer for holding "the typical elitist feminist view which gives prime importance to the woman as an isolated individual unit and almost completely ignores her identity as an active, functional and necessary member of an extended family and a complex rural community."

#### *The site of an uprising*

Twenty kilometres from Kashipur, in the village of Mandibisi, I visit a settlement still called "Holiya Sai", or "The Settlement of the Bonded Labourers" - an echo of the past that persists in the present.

Not far away, the doors open on a small godown, or warehouse, piled high with sweet-smelling produce: neatly tied bundles of broom-grass. Looking at this humble raw material, bought at Rs30 (50 cents) a kilo and used to make the indispensable household broom, one would never guess that it was the focal point of a fierce battle over economic rights 20 years ago between tribal women and the state - a struggle that gave birth to a local women's movement that lasts to this day, and that brought about a change in state law for all non-timber forest produce. The collection of minor forest produce, like firewood, fruits and berries, and medicinal plants, is a traditional part of the lives and livelihoods of tribals. But bringing these activities within the realm of the modern economy and law has proved a complicated business - and one in which the tribals have had little say. "At the time," says Gunjli Ma, a resident of Mandibisi in her 50s who was a prominent figure in what is known today as 'the Mandibisi struggle', "the tribals were obliged to sell minor forest produce to a public-sector organisation called the Tribal Development Cooperative Cooperation (TDCC), at rates decided by the government."

"The rates were a pittance, and the TDCC in turn sold off what it bought from us to private trading companies, who made substantial profits from the manufacture of brooms."

"We wanted to change this unjust law, but for that we first had to get together and form a strategy - and to prepare for the long haul. Were the government and the thana babus [policemen] going to listen to us so easily? Never!" **Civil disobedience** The struggle lasted seven years, and the most dramatic episode in it occurred when the Mandibisi women decided to take the path of civil disobedience and to stockpile broom-grass, illegally. The Forest Department eventually seized the stock, but the conflict was big news in the state, and the government was forced to reconsider its policy.

Finally, in 2000, the law was changed and tribals were given the right to sell minor forest produce themselves.

Ama Sangathan decided to enter the business of brooms as a supplier not just of the raw material, but the finished product. "Today, Ama Sangathan brooms can be found all over the state, as well as in neighbouring Andhra Pradesh, and our organisation has 1,300 members," says Sumoni Jhodia, the president of Ama Sangathan and a long-time associate of Das in many Kasipur struggles.

"New causes come up all the time and we get together to fight them. We fought and banned commercial liquor breweries in five gram panchayats [administrative blocks of villages]. Right now, our task is to stop country-liquor shops in our villages because they are destroying our men and our livelihoods." On the wall of Sumoni's humble home are awards and citations presented to her over the years for her work in the women's and tribal rights movement, and a photograph of her meeting Sonia Gandhi, the president of the Congress Party and probably the most powerful woman in India. "You'll never believe it," she says at a women's meeting later in the week to a rapt audience of young tribal women, "but as a young woman like you, I used to be so shy that in any big gathering of people I would turn my head towards the wall."

"It was because of Agramee that I first gained the confidence to speak up - not just for myself, but on behalf of others. You too must get together and claim your rights."

#### Local politics

Agramee's work in the 1990s dovetailed neatly into a progressive new scheme by the state government to reserve one third of all posts in gram panchayats - or the village-level bodies at the bottom tier of India's newly decentralised governance system - for women.

In an overwhelmingly patriarchal order, many of the women elected to positions of authority under this new scheme, inevitably, were "proxies", the wives or daughters of men who took all the decisions in their name. But, encouraged by their experience in organising and managing women's self-help groups, many tribal women from the Ama Sangathan network decided to stand for village-level elections. Once marginal figures in their societies, they were now entering the political process and exploring all the options available to them as citizens of a democracy.

"In the beginning, I had many doubts about whether I could do this kind of work," says Ghasen Jhodia, a tribal woman in her 40s who spent five years as the sarpanch, or elected head, of Kodipari gram panchayat. "I had to take responsibility for decisions that would affect the lives of so many people, handle sums of money I had never seen before, and divide funds and projects between my village and other villages under my jurisdiction. But slowly, I learned how to enjoy the work and now that I am no more the sarpanch, I miss it." One could argue that women like Ghasen represent a new chapter in the deepening of Indian democracy. A focus on agriculture



Vidhya has been designing creative solutions in agriculture

[Chandrabhas Choudhury/Al Jazeera] "In the last decade," says Das, "most of Agramee's efforts have been focused on agriculture and education. Although I have no formal training in farming, agriculture interests me deeply, as it affects the livelihood of more than two thirds of the people in this country. I guess you could call me an experimental agriculturist. Certainly, I would rather grow food than cook it.

"In these parts where the land is so hilly and so hard to farm, and so many people are landless to begin with, it's very important to ensure sustainable production of subsistence crops." Das prioritises the food security and self-reliance of the tribal small farmer over linkage to the wider food market and participation in the cash economy. "I don't believe that the main task for the small farmers here is to grow a surplus to be able to sell in the market. "As I see it, each family should be able to grow enough food - imperishables like rice and millets, not perishables like vegetables and fruits - to be food secure.

"With much of the traditional forest cover gone and the rainfall pattern greatly altered by climate change, shifting cultivation, which was once extensively practised in these regions, has become untenable. The only option is cultivation with minimal soil disturbance. This will ensure that the top soil does not get washed away with the rains, and help the farmers take up settled cultivation."

#### Beautiful values'

As for the school, this was started in 2005 "for tribal and Dalit [scheduled-caste] girls, as a way of correcting, in a small way, the disabilities that creep into the education of children from underprivileged backgrounds from the very beginning of their lives, and because the girl child is often the first one to be taken out of school and asked to take over household tasks while the boys continue to study".

"Further," she says, "many studies have shown that when women are educated, this has multiplier effects on the entire family." "And it was important to focus not just on the students, but on the teachers, and on the pedagogy. It was very important that they learned to teach in a new kind of way ... When the girls begin school here, they aren't taught the alphabet. After all, those symbols hold no meaning for them. "Rather, they themselves state the words that they want to learn to write: their own names, the names of their family members. The child has a personal relationship with these words and wants to be able to write them.

"Then they learn songs and in time they are made to write those too, so that each time they make a connection between the sound and the symbol. Eventually, they make their own way into language and literacy." Das has drawn strength from her husband, who heads the organisation and shares many of her preoccupations, including a love of writing. "We do not always agree," she says, "but we have always supported and complemented each other's efforts." Like other Indian contrarians - Arundhati Roy, Vandana Shiva, Mahasweta Devi - she is a voice of conscience in India. "We have given ourselves a constitution that enshrines equality, and freedom for every individual," she writes in an essay, "even as it upholds the rights of local people to govern themselves.

"It enshrines the Mahatma's [Gandhi] idea of Swarajya [self-rule], a vision that has been left for us to realise. These are things we should fight for. Not something that we should fight against. Today, in a world of double speak, and hyperbole, these beautiful values are being forgotten ... A democracy becomes effective and meaningful only when state power becomes people's power."

Chandrabhas Choudhury is a novelist based in New Delhi.

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