

PREETILATA Waddadar was born in 1911 in Chittagong, a port town now in Bangladesh. Her father, a nationalist, was a clerk in the local municipality.

In those days it was not thought desirable to educate girls. However, Preetilata's father put her into Dr Khastagir's English high school for girls. I was also studying in the same school, and while we were in junior classes, we became friendly, as we two were the only ones willing to play badminton in the hot midmorning sun, during the tiffin break, which was the only time we could have the badminton court to ourselves.

Preetilata was the eldest child in her family. She was a very good student and dreamt of completing her higher studies so that she could help better the condition of her family. She would often repeat her father's words: "All my hopes are centred on you."

Both of us were inspired by the feats of revolutionary youths like Khudiram and Kanailal, and of women like Rani Laxmibai. Preetilata was a literature student while I was a science student. She was deeply impressed by the revolutionary women characters in the novels of Sarat Chandra and Bankim Chandra. Both of us were eager for action. We joined the girl guides together. Even though we were ashamed to take the pledge "to be loyal to god and the king emperor", and to sing the British national anthem, we tried to learn all the methods of organization which we thought might be useful in building up our own strength.

In 1928 Preetilata went to Dacca to study for the intermediate arts course. There she joined the Deepali Sangh, a seemingly harmless youth organization oriented towards physical fitness, but actually a nationalist organization. She passed her examination with flying colours and got a scholarship to go to Calcutta for BA.

On April 18, 1930, the Indian Republican Army, Chittagong branch, began a series of heroic actions. They captured the armouries in the barracks and police lines, destroyed telegraph and telephone exchanges, and removed railway lines at important junctions, thus cutting

Remembering Preetilata Waddadar

Half a century ago, on September 24, 1932, 21 year old Preetilata dadar, an activist of the Chittagong uprising, led a successful attack on the European club in Chittagong. She was wounded in the operation, and committed suicide. Here Kalpana Joshi, another leading woman activist of that movement, remembers her association with Preetilata.

off the British from other centres. The European men of the town got panicky and removed their families to steamers anchored in the sea.

However, the Chittagong uprising was crushed with the help of forces brought from outside, and many young men lost their lives while others went underground.



In those days, girls were not trusted with this kind of revolutionary work, but on our persistent request, we were gradually taken into the organization.

In Calcutta, Preetilata was given the task of communicating with Ramkrishna Biswas, a revolutionary who was awaiting death in Alipore jail. She posed as his cousin and visited him every day for 40

days, till he was executed. So well did she perform her task that the police never suspected that she was meeting Biswas for the first time.

The superintendent of the girls' hostel where Preeti lived also had no idea that this seemingly calm, quiet and studious girl was visiting the jail every day to meet a condemned man. Preeti's diary, in which she recorded her feelings after each visit, shows that the association with this patriot intensified her desire to join the struggle for freedom.

She completed her BA with distinction and took a job as a teacher in a girls' school, to maintain her family, as her father had by this time lost his job.

In June 1932 she secretly met the president of the Indian Republican Army, Surya Sen, better known as Masterda. Such meetings had to be arranged at night, and Preeti ran great risks to attend them. On one such occasion, the house was surrounded by army men led by Captain Cameron. Two of Preetilata's comrades—Nirmal Sen and 19 year old Apurba Sen—were killed in the shootout that followed. Preeti was unperturbed by the danger to her own life but broke down when she had to tear herself away from her dying comrades.

She returned home and did not show any sign of the experience she had undergone. She continued to be a loving and dutiful daughter to her parents, and to financially support the family. At the same time, she was preparing herself for

revolutionary activity, and finally took the difficult decision to leave her family and career, and start working underground. For three months she lived underground and took training in handling revolvers, pistols and bombs. At this time the British declared a reward for her arrest.

On September 24, 1932, Preeti led a group of eight revolutionaries in an attack on the European club in Chittagong. Each activist was armed and carried a pinch of potassium cyanide.

The attack began at 10 p. m. at the command of Preeti. The club was open to Europeans only. Taken by surprise in their revels, the Europeans used glass bottles and furniture for counter attack, but the revolutionaries overcame this resistance and managed to escape unhurt. Preeti sustained a superficial wound on her chest. As preplanned by her, she took potassium cyanide before anyone could stop her. The death of her two comrades—

one hanged and the other killed by British bullets had affected her deeply. She used to tell Masterda: "They beckon me to come to them."

In her last statement, Preeti wrote:

"We are fighting freedom's battle. The British have snatched away our independence, have bled Indians white and have played havoc with the lives of millions of Indians, both male and female... So we have been compelled to take up arms - though it is not a pleasant thing to take the life of any human being—Women are determined that they will no more lag behind, but will stand side by side with their brothers in any activity, however dangerous and difficult. I earnestly hope that my sisters will no more think themselves weaker, but will prepare themselves to face all dangers and will join the revolutionary movement in thousands."

(condensed from New Age)

Shrimati Vijaya Chowk, president of Samajwadi Mahila Sabha, Dhulia, at a press conference on September 23, charged a local Muslim doctor Jameel Asghar with having raped a 14 year old Muslim girl, the daughter of a powerloom weaver. The girl's father filed a police complaint. According to Shrimati Chowk, the police went to the doctor's dispensary, but though he was present there, they did not arrest him. Instead they took his aged father to the police station. In the meantime, the culprit ran away and is still absconding. Shrimati Chowk demanded that the doctor be arrested, and his licence be taken away by the Indian medical council. This rape has greatly agitated the Muslim community of Dhulia.

(condensed from Maharashtra Times Bombay, sent by Suman Dabholkar, Pune)

Chipko Movement Continues

ON the evening of March 30, the women of Chaudah Bigha were busy in their kitchens, cooking the evening meal. Suddenly someone brought the news: "Have you heard? Hundreds of *sal* trees have been felled." Abandoning their unfinished work, the women streamed towards the forest, where the corpses of trees lay scattered. At 9 p.m., the women sent for a taxi from Rishikesh and a group of them went straight to the Tehri forest officer at Dehradun. The forest officer tried to put them off, but his wife spoke for the women, and on her insistence, both of them went to inspect the site of the illegal felling.

This is not the first such incident. Over the last several years, women's organizations in the villages around Rishikesh have been waging a struggle against corrupt forest officers and thievish contractors. As one woman activist put it: "These trees have cast such a spell on us that we just do not feel comfortable sitting at home."

There was a time when the Doon valley was famed for its lush forests, but in the

last few years, increasing deforestation and soil erosion have destroyed the village economy and forced the local people to migrate to the plains in search of a livelihood. Deforestation also deprives the village women of fuel, fodder and water sources. It destroys wildlife, devastates the natural environment and ruins the climate.

There are militant women's organizations in many villages. The women's organizations of Dhalwala and Shyampur announced a ban on the felling of green trees and green wood, and took direct action against anyone found violating the ban. They would snatch away the axe or scythe of such a person.

There has been a great deal of male hostility to the women's militance. The contractors took advantage of this atmosphere to slander, abuse and threaten the women. Cases were registered against the women of Dhalwala, and they had to fight an eight month long legal battle, from which they emerged victorious. A concerted attempt was made to terrorize the women of Shyampur. Men armed with

lathis attacked their protest demonstrations, and police cases were filed against them. However, the women continued to struggle. Women of village Sيريyan lay down in the path of a truck that was carrying away illegally felled trees, and thus prevented it from moving for eight hours. They finally allowed it to go only when a written apology was tendered to them.

In the course of their struggle the women have discovered that contractors are able to successfully ply their illegal trade in timber, only because of the connivance of corrupt forest officials. Also, forest land is constantly being seized by government for various development projects. Recently, hundreds of acres in Bhariawala and Raiwala have been taken over for the construction of Tehri dam. and thousands of evergreen trees have been destroyed in the process. The women's organizations continue to struggle to protect the trees, the environment, the economy. They not only seek to preserve the living trees but also undertake tree plantation programmes. The women of Chaudah Bigha have planted about 2,000 trees in the forests around their village.

—Yogesh Chandra Bahuguna
(translated from Hindi)