

R APE Victim Dies After Childbirth.” That is how *The Times of India*’s Patna edition headlined the news of the shocking death of Deepa Murmu. Gautam Sarkar’s article of August 23, 1996 caught the attention of millions throughout the state.

Deepa Murmu was an educated tribal woman committed to the nation’s literacy programme. She was a simple, dedicated person who was allegedly raped and made pregnant by Ravinder Singh, the Block Development Officer (BDO) of Barhait, in connivance with K.K. Sinha, the Director of the District Rural Development Agency of Jamui, Bihar. She died at a nursing home under very suspicious circumstances after giving birth to her son.

Five days after reading the account of Deepa’s death, I visited her village, Bamdah, in Jamui district of Bihar and spent two days with her family. Seeing her home, the possessions that she left behind, and getting the chance to meet her relatives, shed some light on the incidents leading to her death and the person that was Deepa. She was a prolific writer whose experiences were very vividly portrayed in the personal diaries and various official and personal letters that she left behind.

As we reached the home of Deepa’s family, my attention was immediately drawn to the presence of police personnel posted to ensure safety to Deepa’s child and family. We were welcomed in by Deepa’s mother. It was about 5 p. m. and we met all the family members except her father, Charles Murmu, who had not yet returned from his job as a teacher in Jhajha. We saw the 25-day-old healthy-looking baby and we spoke to Deepa’s mother, Salomi. From what she told us, along with what could be ascertained from Deepa’s personal diaries, correspondence, and other records left behind, I gathered enough information to

Justice Denied

The Suspicious Death of Deepa Murmu

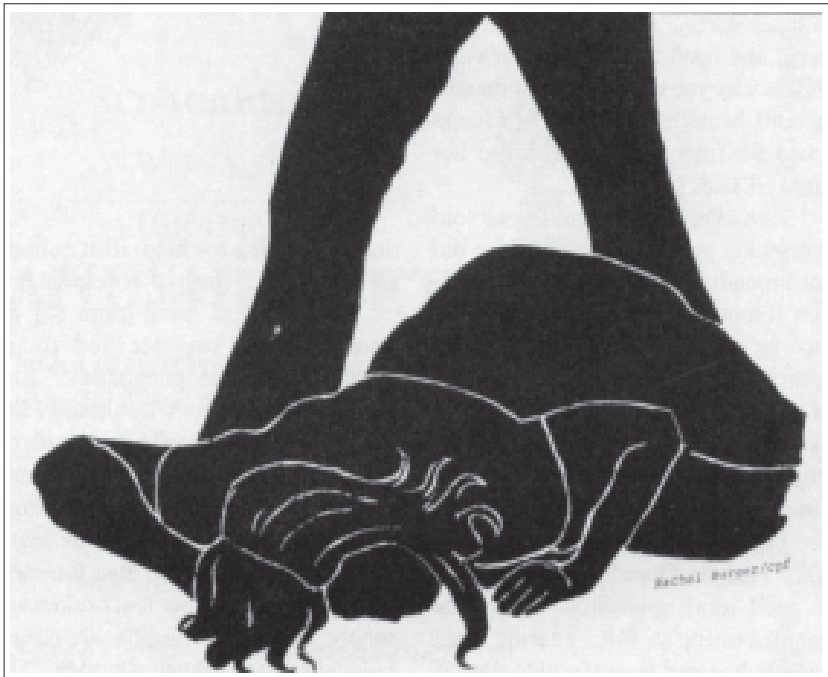
Sudha Varghese

enable me to describe what had happened.

Deepa’s is an educated family, which though financially poor, owns some land. However, since they have been entangled in property related legal battles, the family has been pressed hard and almost ostracised in the village for the past two-and-a-half years. Deepa’s mother had been looking after the legal matters relating to the case, but she fell ill last year and so Deepa took up this additional responsibility. Being the eldest of the children, Deepa was also in charge of looking after her two brothers and sister; one lives at home after completing

matriculation, the other is matriculating, and the youngest girl is in intermediate school.

Deepa was in her early twenties when she joined the literacy programme of Jamui district. The main attraction of the new movement was its newly formed cultural troupe. K.K.Sinha and other state functionaries recognised Deepa as an extraordinarily resourceful person and they were keen that she help make the programme a success. She was encouraged to join the cultural troupe, and once she did join she contributed immensely to it for about two years. In fact, she became the central performer and organiser of



the troupe with her considerable musical and artistic talent.

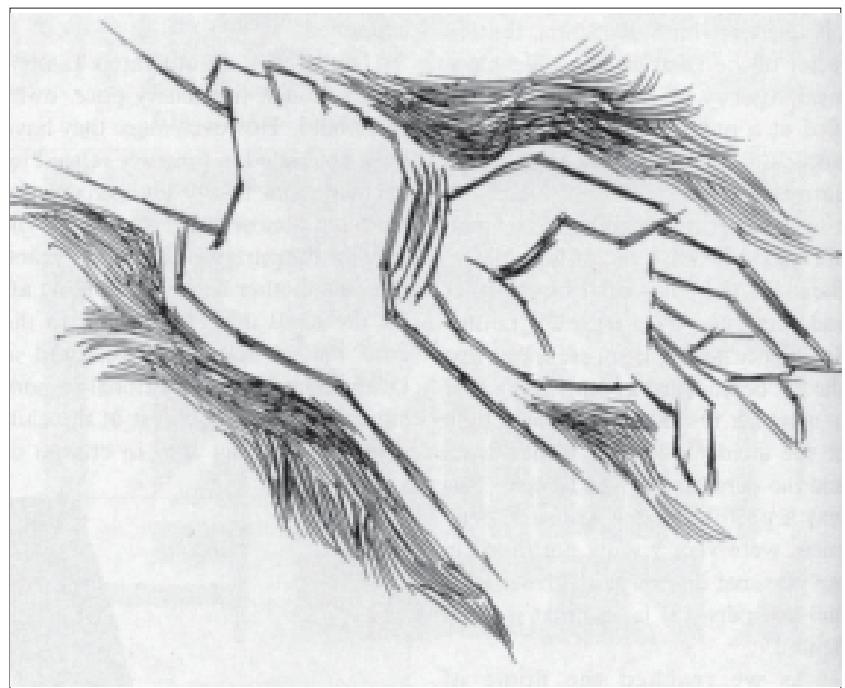
Deepa's writing reveals a woman who was constantly on the move. Sinha used to take her along regularly for various literacy campaign programmes throughout the district. Her creative presence and participation in such programmes was the key to their success. Well-accepted and appreciated by all, she got recognition and a lot of praise, especially from the Director, Sinha.

However, things changed all of sudden. Deepa's nightmare started in the end of November, 1995. On the night of November 27, after a programme held at Aliganj, Sinha took her to the BDO's quarters at Jamui where his family stays. Deepa spent the night there and went for another programme the next day. That night she was again brought back to the same quarters. After supper she went to bed, feeling somewhat unwell. She woke up from a deep sleep at about 3:30 a. m., and found the BDO in bed with her starting to rape her. She protested and tried to shout, but in vain. "Is this why you called me your daughter and brought me here?" Deepa asked the man who came to bid her farewell later.

Soon after the incident Deepa told everything to her mother, but she did not immediately file a First Information Report (FIR). Like many other rape victims, she was confused, filled with shame, and haunted by the fear of getting pregnant. Later, as she began to feel unwell, she consulted Dr Rupa Singh who confirmed her pregnancy. Soon she began to write about her plight to the concerned authorities. But the Director and the BDO feigned total ignorance. Then she decided to file an FIR. Fearing that a case in the local *thana* (police station) or even in

Jamui would be suppressed since government officials were involved, she decided to go to Patna to meet the Chief Minister. With her complaints in writing she reached Patna on April 5 and met Mr Laloo Prasad Yadav.

After a patient hearing Mr Yadav ordered an investigation. An FIR was filed and Deepa was sent back to Jamui under police escort. From April to August, Deepa wrote letter after letter to different ministers and officials, telling them of her precarious situation and asking for help. But nobody seemed to be interested in helping her.



Deepa could have gone for an abortion, but she decided to go through with the pregnancy. She wrote in her diary, "Why should I kill this innocent child who has done no wrong? Actually, the one who should die is the BDO." But during those days she contemplated suicide many times. Probably, more than the rape, the rejection made her feel broken and lonely. Each time she considered suicide, she turned down the idea. She says in one of her letters to the Superintendent of Police

(SP) of Jamui: "Somehow I have fallen in love with this tiny existence I carry within me; even in these terrible circumstances. I cannot commit suicide."

Finally, after an agonisingly long period of time, Deepa gave birth to a boy, on August 5, 1996, two weeks before the expected due date. But due to post-delivery complications, she was rushed to Jhajha, a town roughly 38 km away. As soon as she reached the clinic of Dr Abhay Singh, she was given two injections. Soon after she said "Ma, *khatam*" (It is over). Her

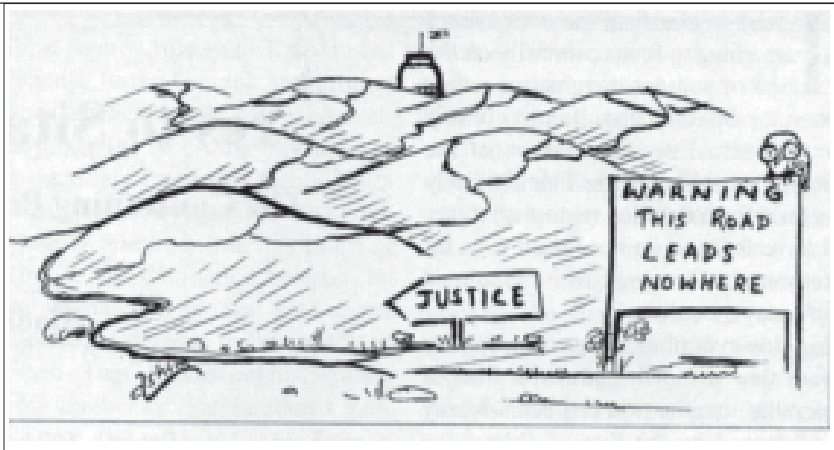
parents claim that the doctor had asked the compounder to administer the injections without having even seen the patient. A little later the doctor came and pronounced her dead. Dr Abhay is the husband of Dr Rupa Singh who had earlier verified Deepa's pregnancy.

The desperate parents brought their daughter's body home. The grieved mother ran to the District Magistrate, the SP, and the Director informing them of Deepa's death and of the possible foul play, and demanded

a post mortem. The family kept the body for three days waiting for the district administration to move. Finally, the only thing that happened was that they received a visit from the local *thana* in-charge on the third day. Deepa was buried on the evening of August 7 after her body had already started decomposing.

Deepa Murmu's case has left behind a volley of questions for our society to answer. Deepa was an extraordinarily gifted woman deeply committed to a great national cause. Women from the villages are a vital force in the literacy drive. Yet, she was abused and discarded by the programme's own leaders. Worst of all, she was even branded a 'loose woman' for being open, outgoing, and bold, qualities which were crucial for the effective implementation of the programme.

If this is the fate of Deepa, what might happen to other women who may dare to risk their lives for similar causes? Can a government which endangers the very life of women who join its service ever become an effective



instrument for spreading the message of women's equality and empowerment? If women like Deepa do not come forward, where will the women come from to share the 33 percent reservation for a say in the nation's decision-making? If the 33 percent emerge at all, how many of them will be Dalit and tribal women?

Serious doubts are being raised about the functioning of the legal and administrative bodies in our country. Will justice ever be done to Deepa? A few political parties and various

women's organisations have already started agitation for justice — the arrest of the culprits, an impartial paternity test for the child, and remuneration for Deepa's son and her family.

On visiting the inconspicuous grave of Deepa Murmu, you get the impression of a lonely existence — a heap of stones, a single wooden cross, and the *tenthu* plants around watch over her eternal resting place by the hillside close to her home, on her forefathers' soil. □

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