

# Scholar, Fighter, Mother

The life of Ratnamayi  
Devi as narrated to  
Madhu Kishwar



A recent photo of Ratnamayi (right) with her daughter Sharada (Om)

Most of the women who were politically active in the freedom movement came into it through the prior involvement of male members of their families and, after independence, some of them rose to positions of prominence. Ratnamayi Devi is one of the very few women who was drawn into the movement on her own, through her search for a livelihood and the wherewithal to educate her children. After independence, the compulsions that had brought her into political activity drew her out of it. Her life is remarkable for the tremendous courage and endurance with which she raised her large family of real and adopted children. A crucial factor in the family's achievement of upward mobility were the strong bonds of continuing support between mothers and daughters, who sustained each others' attempts to get an education and become self reliant.

I was born in 1909 in Pachallur, a village four miles from Trivandrum, Kerala. I belong to a family of landowners. We are Nairs. In the highest Nair families in Kerala, generally, women marry Brahmans, not other Nairs. The woman stays in her own house and the husband comes and visits her there. She does not shift to his house. The children are the responsibility of the mother's family, not the father's. This was

the custom till the first quarter of the twentieth century. The matrilineal system was prevalent. If there is no girl, the lineage will be destroyed. So when I say "my family" I am referring not to my father's but to my mother's, grandmother's, great-grandmother's family.

My grandmother had several brothers and sisters. But she had only one surviving child, my mother. And I also

happened to be an only child. In a joint family the brothers and sisters lived together. The eldest brother and sister together managed the family affairs.

In our family, my grandmother's eldest brother managed all the family property—we had big compounds with many trees, fields, house. He had 40 wives. When he saw a woman he liked, he would talk to her uncle or brother and say he would like to

make her his wife. His being a noble family, they would not refuse. He would go to her every night, as long as he liked. Then, he would give her some property without telling other family members. This was illegal. But my grandmother was illiterate and never questioned his doings, so he carried on like that. We had so many cousins in surrounding villages.

My grandmother, Gouriamma, was married at the age of nine to a Tamil Brahman scholar. It so happened that each time she had a child, and conceived again, the first child died as soon as the second one was born. In this way, she lost four daughters. When my mother, Parvatamma, was born and her elder sister died, my grandmother got very upset, and told her husband : "I must have committed some sin. Maybe I am not serving you properly. I want this daughter to survive so you please leave me." She thought there was some fault in her service of him, because wives in those days thought the husband was god. In this case the feeling was stronger because he was a Brahman.

My grandfather took my mother in his lap and said : "I swear, the day this child

dies I will divorce you. But let me take care of her." And he took my mother to his house.

### **First Educated Woman**

She was brought up there, by his second wife, a Tamilian. My grandfather was careful that she should get a good basic education. That was the first time for hundreds of years a girl in our family was educated. Men used to be educated in Sanskrit and Malayalam but women only learnt to sing and dance within the four walls of the house.

My grandmother sometimes used to go and stay with her husband and he too came to stay in her house. When my mother was 10 years old, her father died, and she returned to our house. My grandmother was 35 years old at that time. By then, almost all the property, except the house, had been given away to others by my mother's uncle.

My mother insisted that she would continue her studies. When her uncle heard it, he came with the ceremonial sword and said : "I will cut you to pieces if you try to study." She said : "Cut me if you like but I will study." He said : "I will see how

you go. I will burn the house down." She said ; "Burn the house. We will manage somehow."

So she started going to school with her mother's support and with the help of a friend of her father's. In those days, the government used to give a scholarship of Rs 5 to every girl who went to school. So she completed her education. She was the only educated woman in the whole area. Other girls would not dare disobey their uncles or brothers. But she had great courage and self confidence. She was also very beautiful.

After she passed the required examination, she was appointed as the headmistress of a vernacular girls' school, on a salary of Rs 10 a month. The lifestyle at home was no longer luxurious. They needed the extra income. My mother took a separate house near the school and lived there with her mother.

When she was 20 years old, my mother got married. My father was a classmate and friend of hers. He used to visit the house and my grandmother also was very fond of him. The marriage created an uproar because he was also a Nair. Her uncle continually threatened to burn the house down and to kill all concerned. But my mother was undeterred. She said : "I will do what I think is right." For three years, they had no child. My grandmother was worried because the family name would continue only if my mother had children. Even though a girl was considered the mainstay of the family, when I was born, my grandmother's sister exclaimed in disappointment : "Oh, it's a girl !" My grandmother said : "But she's gold for me." And she was the one who brought me up.

My father too was a teacher, one grade lower than my mother. She used to get transferred to various places within Travancore state. My father would take leave and accompany her, or ask for a transfer to the same place. But it was never the other way around— my mother never did this.

There was a great contrast between

**Ratnamayi (centre) aged 15, with her parents and two maidservants who were like daughters of the family**



them. My mother was a terrible disciplinarian. My father was very soft by nature. He could not scold anyone or get angry. My mother's word was law for him. He loved her so much. He had lost his parents in early childhood and had been brought up by his sister. He treated my grandmother as his own mother.

Now they were in great financial difficulties due to the loss of the land. So

### All Work, No Play

She was a headmistress and she brought school discipline into the house too. I was admitted in her school at the age of two and a half. I was supposed to stand first in class on my own merit, without the slightest favouritism, and if I did not, I would be punished.

From the age of five, the routine was— get up at 4 a.m., have a bath, join my

Malayalam literature. I read the works of Bankim, Tagore and others in translation. My mother encouraged me to participate in extracurricular activities at school — drama, debates, writing for magazines. She was very ambitious for me.

Till the age of 15, I did not know what sorrow was. I was afraid only of my mother. If she came to know I had told an untruth or even lost a pencil, she would speak not with words but with a stick.

In 1925, a new law was passed in Travancore that all joint family property amongst Nairs should be split up equally amongst all members of the family. So our family property had to be divided among 60 people—my mother's distant relatives, nephews, nieces and others. Naturally, our share was very small and our standard of living suddenly declined.

At this time, I was studying in an English school. My mother was determined that I should be a doctor and take the medical exams in England. My Malayalam teacher Munshi K.R. Parameshwaran Pillai was attracted to me because I was a good student. I never thought of him as anything but my teacher. I was 15 years old and he was 33.

### Marriage At Fifteen

He belonged to a rich Nair family of Adoor. He proposed that I marry his younger brother whom he was educating to be a lawyer. My father happened to find out that this brother was having an affair with a lady student at Trivandrum, whom he later married.

Then my teacher proposed on his own behalf and made me accept. My father was against it—he did not like the family. My grandmother too was not happy. She did not like the idea of a daughter going far away from the house after marriage as, according to the prevalent custom, the daughter belonged to the house and should stay there. But my mother liked him. To this day, I have not understood what made her arrange my marriage so early, when she had earlier been so determined on my becoming a doctor.



Ratnamayi's mother, Parvatiamma, with her students, 1924

my mother filed a suit against her uncle, claiming the property he had illegally transferred to his wives. She had to face a lot of criticism for this. I was born when she was 24 years old, and soon after, she won the case and all the property became legally hers. Naturally, they thought it was my luck! Anyway, they were now well off. My grandmother told my mother there was no need for her to continue working. But she refused to leave her job.

My mother got all the property whereas her cousins and their children got nothing. They were just poor relations. Some of them worked in our house. They were not educated. My mother was very charitable and generous but when I grew up I felt the division was unjust. But no one dared tell my mother that. She was very dominating.

parents' worship of the goddess, take a lesson from the music master at 5 a.m., go to school from 10 to 4, then after a quick wash and a meal, do my homework with my tutor, study for an hour and go to bed at 8 p.m. This routine continued till I matriculated at the age of 14.

I had to go to school with my mother and return with her. As soon as the bell rang for recess I had to reach her room or I would be scolded or beaten. I was not to talk to anyone or go out. Well, yes, I did play with my father sometimes. I was also a voracious reader. And one game I played with my parents was *antyakshri*— in Malayalam poetry. That way I learnt a lot of poems. My daughter and I still enjoy doing this.

That was a particularly rich period for

I was not very happy. I wanted to study, and my husband said I could continue studying after marriage. I was not unwilling either—I enjoyed the pomp and show of the wedding. We were married in June 1924.

The funniest part of it was that on the first night, the first thing he had to tell me was : “Don’t think I believe any woman. I know what all women are. Nobody is indispensable for me. Don’t think I will trust any woman.” I was shocked. I was only 15. I didn’t know what he meant.

Later, I came to know he was already married and had a son, and was already a disillusioned person. He wanted to forget that marriage. I came to know this through others. I asked him. He said: “Yes, so what ?” By that time I was also disillusioned.

In Trivandrum, monogamy was practised but in the place where his family lived, polyandry was the custom—like Draupadi. It is the right of all the brothers to share the eldest brother’s wife. We in South Travancore didn’t know this.

I was sent to Trivandrum for my medical studies. My husband did not want me to stay in a hostel so we took a house. But I was not happy there and I fell ill so we wound up the house and I came back to my home. In June, I joined college, and in August I left.

My husband was very nice to me. But he was of a suspicious nature. If I talked to somebody he would interpret it in a different way. So I gave up talking to people. He was also suspicious of my mother. She had many friends. She was a social worker and a headmistress. She was a very independent person.

My husband did not like my father’s friends visiting our house. He even insulted one of them and told him to get out of the house. That hurt me. I asked : “Do you mean to say our friends cannot visit us ?” He said : “No, nobody will come.” I told my mother and she agreed with him, for my sake. But I was very upset. Also, he did not show proper respect to my mother. Slowly, his attitude to her had changed.



**Ratnamayi’s mother in law,  
Umminiamma, with baby Om**

My husband used to ask my mother for money to educate his brother. My father objected to this. But my mother insisted on giving it. Property was sold, money, was borrowed. Her reason for giving in to my husband in everything was : “Otherwise, my daughter will suffer.”

### **Trying To Be An Ideal Wife**

But, slowly, I was getting estranged from him. He used to drink heavily which

we did not know earlier. He used to stay out for one or two nights at a time. But I thought I should remember the stories in the *Puranas* and win him over by my loyalty and love. But there came a point when my father and husband clashed. My husband succeeded in estranging my father from my mother. My mother began to wrongly suspect my father of having other relationships and, one day, she shaved her head, wore a white *sari*, and said she had taken *sanyas*.

In 1926, my daughter was born, in our own house. My grandmother was about 75 years old but quite healthy, managing everything, as I am doing now. My daughter was named Sharada, and called Omana (which means “darling”) at home, or Om for short.

When she was three months old, I went to stay at my in-laws’ house at Adoor. In my parents’ house, I had never done any housework. I did not know how to cook. My in-laws’ house was a huge feudal set up with labourers living and eating at the house. Food was cooked for more than 40 people daily. I tried to learn the work. But everyone there criticised and taunted me, thinking I was proud because I was an educated girl from the city. My ways were strange to them, for instance, women there did not wear blouses and were used to bathing in the open whereas I was brought up with urban ways, always bathing in the house and wearing blouses. I was also the first woman in that family who refused to live with her husband’s brothers. This may be one reason they did not like me although they could not state it openly. That custom has died out now.

My mother kept sending clothes and other things for me and Om. But they used to disappear from my room because everything was treated as common property. Nor did my husband provide these things for us. My mother had given

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**My greatest fear was that people would say I was  
proud of my education**

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me gold jewellery—four thick bracelets, two chains, a belt and anklets. My husband took them to keep in the bank. When I next asked for them he said : “They have been sold.” Twice more, my mother bought me jewellery and it went the same way.

Often, he used to come very late at night, I would be waiting for him. I would not eat. He would say : “Why do you wait ?” But I believed that a wife should eat the husband’s leftovers. I was a vegetarian and if he was eating fish ,or meat, I could not bear to eat the leftovers. So I would go without eating for three, to four days at a time. I would drink tea or have some rice and salt. I dared not complain because I was afraid people would say I was proud of my education. This was my greatest fear.

My husband’s widowed sister was also staying in the house with her two daughters, Thangam and Sarasam. She told me that everyone ill treated and neglected them. So I adopted the two girls, even though I had to face opposition from other relatives.

As a student, I used to write for various magazines and had become quite a well known writer. But all my literary activities had to stop once I came to Adoor. I had written one novelette *Venugopalan* about a boy who goes from a village to a city to study. My husband got it published. He too was a writer so he had contacts. But he gave the copyright of my book to a friend of his. That book became a prescribed text in schools, and sold in thousands. It is still an approved text. All the money went to that man. I got only Rs 100. My husband would do anything for his friends.

I was discontented by my condition in Adoor but I was determined to do my duty—to serve my husband. And he never insulted me or tried to hit me. He always showed me great respect in the presence of others. He showed love and respect in words but not so much in actions. We did not have the closeness a husband and wife should have. I could not bear his drinking



**Ratnamayi with husband Munshi Pillai, Om and baby Mani**

and going to other women. I could not stand the smell of drink. And he never brought his salary home—he spent it in drinking or gave it away to his friends. It was the same with his income from his writing.

When I became pregnant again, my husband refused to send me to my mother for delivery. I was not keeping well. So my mother took leave on half pay, and came to Adoor. We took a separate house near my in-laws’ house, and we began to live separately. My husband sometimes came and gave some money but for months together, he would not give any. My son Viresh was born in May 1929.

I was now very worried. How would I bring up and educate the children properly ? I was not qualified enough to stand on my own feet. At this time, an exclassmate, Ponamma, came to see me. She had become a doctor in these four years. I much regretted having given up my studies and decided that I must resume my studies. But where would the money come from ?

### **Education Resumed**

Anyway, I took a chance and sent an application to Trivandrum Women’s College. Fortunately, I was admitted. There was terrible opposition from my in-laws. My mother encouraged me, and promised to look after the children. When I asked

my husband, he said : “I will not help you with a single pice, but you can do as you like” He did not stop me. That was a blessing to me. So I decided to go. I felt if it was god’s will, a way would be opened.

I had to keep a peaceful picture of our home life, otherwise people would blame me, the woman, whatever be the truth

When I left, my son, Viresh, was 40 days old. My husband’s brother and I went to Trivandrum. We reached at 7 p.m. and the hostel warden refused to admit me, saying the hostel was only for unmarried women. She would not let me stay even one night. My husband had said that if I could not get into the hostel, I should return home. I just sat on the verandah and cried. Then, the Sanskrit lecturer in the college, who was acquainted with my brother-in-law, took me to her house. Her name was V K. Korthyayamma. She was a great support to me. Soon, the principal admitted me into the hostel.

In the beginning, I had great difficulty in English because I was out of touch with it for four years. I was the oldest girl in the class. The first day, the English teacher made very sarcastic remarks about my English essay. I cried and cried. I did not want to attend class. But my English teacher called me, apologised, and then took the responsibility of improving my English. She worked so hard with me that I stood first in English in the first year exam. Such were the teachers I had. So I had a good time in the college and hostel.

In this year, my mother and the children were thrown out of the house by my husband, so they went to the place where my mother was posted and she reported to duty. I was meeting my expenses by giving tuition to two small children. I copied out most of my textbooks by hand. I used to go to my mother in the vacations.

Just before the selection exams in the second year, my mother suddenly came to see me. I was surprised. Then she told me that my son had died of diphtheria. She had informed my husband but he didn’t come. She came herself to tell me instead of writing.

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## **I had to keep a peaceful picture of our home life, otherwise people would blame me, the woman, whatever be the truth**

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In the final exam, I got very good marks in all subjects but I failed in British history which I had never liked. So I failed. Everyone except my mother laughed at me and taunted me. It was a very dark period for me. I even stopped praying to god. But my teachers insisted that I should take the supplementary exam in September.

Their affection compelled me to agree.

In July, my mother suddenly was struck by paralysis. She was a rheumatism patient. We had no money. My husband used to just come, talk sarcastically and go back. Then, fortunately, I was appointed in my mother’s place in her school. It was easy for me to teach because I had observed my mother’s teaching. I appeared for the exam and passed with distinction marks. When my mother recovered, I also taught in another school and saved some money.

My Sanskrit teacher advised me to join BA Sanskrit honours in the Presidency College, Madras University. In those days, Madras University had a system—one could get a BA degree in two years. But if one continued for another year, one would get a BA honours degree and after one year, also an MA degree automatically. But if one failed the exam one would get no degree at all—not even BA. It was a risk.

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### **This was a very difficult time for me I had to support four people.**

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I wanted to join. I thought now that god had brought me so far, he would definitely show me a way. My mother sold the little gold she had and gave me Rs 200. She had retired and was getting a pension of Rs 25 a month. She stayed alone with my children, in a house belonging to my in-laws, at Adoor. My husband came and stayed there off and on. I went to Madras

and stayed in the Queen Mary’s hostel.

I joined in 1932. That year, the Sanskrit Academy had started some competitions such as writing a critical study of a Sanskrit drama, recitation from the *Gita* and writing the message of the *Gita* in any language. My professor, Kuppuswami Shastri, knew I needed financial help. He told me to enter these competitions. I was hesitant because I knew even MA students were competing for the first one. I did not want to be laughed at. But on my teacher’s insistence, I entered. I got all three scholarships—a total of about Rs 85 a month.

This was a very difficult time for me. I had to support four people—mother, Om, Thangam, and myself. Also, my husband was constantly asking my mother for money; often, she had to feed him and his friends. So I had to keep sending money. Of course, I was not forced to do so. But I felt I had to do my duty. I used to borrow from friends and classmates. I got into so much debt.

I used to go home for vacations. I would take sets of clothes for Om. Her father would often present them to his nieces or his friends’ daughters. The poor child would not dare tell him not to give them. Nor could I. Because my mother was living in his house. And I had to keep a calm and peaceful picture of our home life, otherwise people would blame the woman, whatever be the truth.

Anyway, three years passed and I passed BA honours with a first class. In 1935, I joined the Madras University as a PhD student working; on the topic “The technique of Sanskrit drama in theory and practice” on a scholarship of Rs 75 a month.

But now another problem arose. While studying for BA, from 1929 to 1935, I did not have any physical relations with my husband. But in 1935 we had relations and immediately I conceived. My son, 10 years

younger to Om, was born. His name is Jotindranath (called Mani at home). Then, I came to Madras with my mother and children and rented a house there. I got my husband's older niece, Thangam, married off. I had brought her up as my daughter. She now has four sons. Most people still know her as my eldest daughter. At that time, I got a small job in Queen Mary's College, distributing the mail, on a salary of Rs 20. This added to my income.

I admitted Om in a convent school. She



**Shardamani (Om)**

was very good in Malayalam and Sanskrit, but she didn't know English. She did not know Tamil either. So she couldn't mix with the other girls. Most students in that school were from rich families, whereas I couldn't afford to give her even good skirts and blouses. She had to wash and wear the same sets again and again. She was miserable there at first but she didn't let me know. Other girls used to come well dressed for school functions. Om wouldn't attend. She would say : "It's a holiday." Then sometimes I saw her in tears, and I knew. I couldn't do anything about it.

But I kept her in that school because my one and only ambition was to give the children the best education. I wanted her to study and get a good job. Slowly, by

reading novels, she picked up English and made a few friends with whom she still maintains contact.

During this time, I also did my MA in Malayalam privately. Madras University did not have any provision for private examinations but I applied for special permission. I did not get it. Then I went through all the regulations of the university and I found a small clause saying that a person who has an MA degree in one language can appear privately for MA in

free dispensary. Both my sons were named by the Swami who was the president of the Math. The second son was named Narendra Nath, after Swami Vivekananda.

He is called Shrish at home. Om too was named Shardamani Devi, after the Holy Mother. In 1940, the Holy Mother's birthday was celebrated as usual. I was asked to speak in English at the public meeting about her life and message. When my speech was over, an old, foreign lady wearing a *sari* came to me and asked :

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**My one aim was to get a job and educate my children. That was all I wanted to achieve, nothing else.**

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another language. Om and I typed 24 copies of this clause and sent it to all the authorities. In February 1939. I got permission to appear and the exam was in March ! Anyway, I passed and topped the list—first class first. Simultaneously, I also passed MA in English privately. I also started learning Urdu. I got a temporary job teaching Malayalam in Madras Christian College. I was the first woman teacher there.

But my research guide found my thesis unsatisfactory and asked me to rewrite it. He did not like my having a child during the research period and thought I was not serious. I could not afford to rewrite and submit it again as I had no job, and so no income. I had to borrow money from moneylenders, at 10 percent interest per month, to feed my children.

My husband used to come and stay with me off and on. He had become a good playwright but I never asked him for money because it was another principle of mine not to ask for money. My son Shrish was born in 1940.

**Another Mother**

There was another development in my life at this time. I came very close to the Ramakrishna Mission. Both my parents had been attached to the Mission for a long time. After shifting to Madras, I used to go to the Math every Sunday. My mother used to get injections from their

"What is your name, child ?" In the south, we don't have Mr and Mrs. So I told my name : "Ratnamayi Devi." She asked what I was doing. I said I was teaching in a college. She said : "Then you are a lady." I said : "No, I am not a lady."

There was a reason for my answer. In 1935, when I was in BA final year, Sarojini Naidu had come to our college. One student got up and requested her for a message for the "lady students." She replied : "Lady students? Are you

**Umadevi**



ashamed to call yourself a woman ?” She continued that “lady” is an anglicised word whereas “woman” is more dignified ; it is the confidence and will power of women which keeps the nation going forward ; Bapu has called women to come to the forefront. These words were fixed in my heart.

Umadevi was a Polish lady who came to India in 1933 and got converted to Hinduism. She had a friend, Mr Maurice Friedman, working in Mysore as an engineer, who was like a brother to her. She was visiting different places, doing social work. She visited my house. I prepared boiled vegetables for her. She was a pure vegetarian. Then she said : “You are my first daughter in India.” She said it with so much love that I accepted her as my mother. I invited her to come and stay with me. She stayed in our house for one and a half months. We grew very close to each other. She came to know all about me. She asked Mr Friedman to pay up my debt of Rs 400. I was hesitant to take it but he insisted, saying he had given it to Uma and she was giving it to me.

Now, my term in the college was coming to an end and I was wondering how to manage. Then, Umadevi wrote to Bapu. Mr Friedman was a constant visitor to the Wardha Ashram. Later, Umadevi settled in Dharamsala and opened an Ashram there, where Tibetan refugees also stayed. She died only a few years ago. Till the end, she considered me her daughter.

In 1941, I got a letter from Wardha, asking me to go and see the Ashram. Umadevi gave me Rs 30 for the fare and I went to Sewagram. I had read about the freedom movement, but I was not involved. I had no intention of joining it. My one aim at that time was to get a job and educate my children. That was all I wanted to achieve, nothing else.

I came to Mahila Ashram, Wardha. At that time, it was an asylum for women—daughters, sisters, wives, mothers—of men who had joined the movement, gone to jail or died, and could not support them. Shri

Jamnala Bajaj had started this institution. The building belonged to one Shantabai Raniwala who had donated it for this purpose, and was the chief donor.

### **In Search Of A Living**

When I reached, Mr Friedman told me : “Bapu wants you to stay here. What do you say ?” He had already told Bapu about me. I said : “If I get a suitable job I will come. I need a livelihood and I have to educate my children.”

Then I met Bapu. He asked me : “Do you want to come here ?” I said : “Yes.” “Why ?” “Mr Friedman said I can get a job here.” “What about your political ideas ?” I had no political ideas so I kept quiet. When he repeated the question, I said : “I don’t have any political ideas. I am just living for the sake of educating my children.” He had a good laugh and said : “No, no, if you come here you must have some political ideas.” I was very nervous, talking to such a big person. Then he said : “If you want to come, there are two conditions. You must believe in *swavalamban* (self reliance) and you must learn to speak and write Hindi well, because in Mahila Ashram, all correspondence is in Hindi. It is December now and you have to join in June. You must learn Hindi before you join.”

I saw the place, stayed there two days and liked it. But I felt this was not the right place for me. Because the principle there

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### **The principal there was : most work, least pay**

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was : most work, least pay. And my first aim was to educate my children. I believed and still believe that once I had become a mother, my first duty was to my family. If I wanted to do public service, I should not have married.

So when I returned to Madras, I hoped to continue as a lecturer somewhere and I forgot all about Hindi. Some of my friends did say that I should go to Wardha because it was a good opportunity, but I did not take their opinion seriously. Then,

my college job, which was temporary, ended, and I was in the wilderness again. At that time, another letter came from Mahila Ashram, asking me to join as the Sanskrit and English teacher, and slowly

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### **Kusum (left) and other girls working in Mahila Ashram**



learn the job to take the position of the principal ; I decided to go. Om was admitted to Queen Mary’s College, getting a scholarship, studying science. My mother stayed in Madras with Om and Mani. I took Saras and the baby Shrish with me to Wardha. There was a small house for me, and I settled in.

The next day I had to go to meet Bapu. Bapu was in Sewagram and the Ashram was in Wardha, four and a half miles away. When I reached, Bapu asked in Hindi : “How are you ? And how did you come ?” I replied in English that I had come in a *tonga*. Then he said in English : “I told you to learn Hindi. Now you will go back to the Ashram and will not come to see me till you are able to talk to me in Hindi. Secondly, you came in a *tonga*. How many Indians would be able to take a *tonga* ? You have come to serve the people. If you want to see me, you must walk and come here.” I was almost in tears and thought I would go back to Madras. He said : “You are not going back, you are going to the

Ashram. Join duty and learn Hindi as soon as possible and then come and see me.”

### New Way Of Life

So I came and joined duty in the Mahila Ashram. At that time there were about 300 women and girls living there, aged between 12 and 40. All the work was done by the inmates. There were no servants at all. We were divided into groups and rotated the different kinds of work between us—cooking, washing, cleaning the rooms, cleaning toilets, filling water. In the morning, one group would have classes and the other group would work; in the afternoon, in reverse order. Hindi and



Mealtime on Bapu's birthday, after a cleaning session at the Ashram

spinning was compulsory for everyone. We had to wear *khadi* which we had spun ourselves. We were not allowed to have more than three sets of clothes each. The maximum pay for any worker was Rs 75 and the minimum Rs 50.

We got three meals a day—free. This was paid for by the founder. The meals were—wheat porridge and milk in the morning, lentils, vegetables and rice and *roti* in the afternoon, curds every alternate day, and lentils, vegetables and rice in the evening at 7 p.m. At festivals, we prepared Maharashtrian sweets.

Our routine was like this. In the morning we would get up at 4.30 and have prayers on the terrace. Then, the groups would begin their work and the classes according to the shifts. After lunch, one hour rest and then the second shift. English started in class six. We also laid stress on physical training and exercises because Bapu insisted that women should

be trained in self defence, so that to save their honour even if they had to fight and kill they should be able to do it. We had drills with dumbbells and lezium. At that time, most of the teachers there were married couples.

I started studying Hindi. I read novels. The first novel I read was Premchand's *Godan*. I found the gender system difficult. In Hindi every object is either masculine or feminine, whereas in Malayalam, like English, all inanimate objects are neuter gender. For several months, I had to struggle to fit in. The other teachers were political workers who had worked for years in the movement, giving up everything. They felt it was favouritism for me to be brought in and placed above them. Apart from willingness to work, I had no other qualification. I was sympathetic but had no political background. Most of the women could not speak to me because they didn't know English. When I spoke my broken Hindi, they would laugh. But anyway I picked up the work, and learnt to spin.

Another problem arose—my mother fell very ill in Madras. Om had a very difficult time going to college, and looking after her and the house and Mani too. And my mother had a very bad temper. Om was afraid of her. My children always had complete faith in me, Om particularly. There have never been any secrets between us. Once, when she was about seven years old, my mother told her something and

### Shrish (second from right) at Bal Bhavan, Wardha



asked her not to tell me. She replied: “If mother is not to be told, don't tell me because I tell mother everything.” This shows what our relationship always was. I did not hide anything from her. Once, when she was small she asked me what is the difference between a boy and girl. I told her to observe her brother and herself and find out. When she said: “This is the difference” I said: “Yes, that is it and that is for producing children when one is grown up.”

So Om wrote and told me that it was becoming very difficult for her to look after my mother. It would be better for me to take mother with me to Wardha. Then Om could stay in the hostel and she could get a fee concession. I would not have to send her any money. I brought my mother and Mani also to Wardha. But my mother was more or less paralysed. It was very difficult for me to manage with her and the two children and the Ashram work. Also, I felt I should not take advantage of the older workers, and I was not of much use to them. So I should leave and return to Madras. I had to take Bapu's permission. But he had made a condition that I must speak to him in Hindi.

Finally, I plucked up my courage and wrote a letter to him in my broken Hindi. He sent a reply saying that he went for a walk every day at 6 a.m. I could go and walk with him and discuss whatever I wanted with him during the walk. No other time was available. He always took two girls with him as his walking sticks. He would keep me as one of them. I was very nervous, first because I was not sure of my Hindi, and second, to speak Hindi while walking—he used to walk very fast and I was not used to walking at all. As it is, I had to walk to Sewagram to meet him. Anyway, I went. When I bowed to him, he slapped my back and said: “So, you have come.” We set out, Manu on one side and I on the other. Bapu said: “Now tell me.” I tried my best to explain in Hindi. He saw it was difficult so he said: “If you want, speak in English.” But I said: “No, I will speak in Hindi.” He laughed: “You are

obstinate !”

Then he spoke in English and asked how I would find a job in Madras. He advised me to wait till Jamnalalji came out of prison, in a month’s time. He said : “We will consult him and then we will decide. You have put up with so much, you have come all the way from Madras, now I think you should stay here.” When we returned, Bapu asked : “How did you come ?” I said : “I came walking.” He laughed : “So, you have learnt. All right, now you can go.” It was 7a.m. I touched his feet and he went for his bath. I had expected he would at least ask me to have breakfast. I was wondering how I would walk back.

Just then, Ba sent someone to call me. She smiled and asked me to sit, and gave me breakfast. This was the difference between a father and a mother ! I walked back and by the time I reached Sewagram I had 104 degrees fever. I was not used to walking and I had walked about 11 miles at a stretch. That was the only illness I had all my life, except for my asthma.

### **The Ashram Is Yours**

Then I decided to send my mother back and she agreed. In November, Jamnalalji came out of prison. He called me and we had a long talk. I told him that the other Ashram workers did not much like me and perhaps I should leave rather than annoy them. I was also worried about my debts and my mother’s illness.

He listened and then said : “You can send your mother back as you have decided. If you need money, we do have the treasury. You need not worry. All I have to tell you is that you belong to the Ashram and the Ashram is yours. If some people say something about me, will I leave the Ashram and go ? Where you are thinking of going, will people never say anything against you ? Would you then leave that place too ? You cannot run away from everywhere. You are to stay here. You are not to leave. I am sure your problems will gradually get resolved.” He advised me to keep the children with me and put them in the Bal Bhavan, Wardha. I decided to obey Jamnalalji.



**Bapu at Wardha**

My husband at this time never wrote to me and as usual never bothered to help look after my mother or the children.

In February 1942, Jamnalal Bajaj died suddenly of a heart attack. By that time, the people of the Ashram had changed their behaviour towards me. Our work was going on well. Things became smooth for me. By then, I had become friendly with the Dixit family. Dixitji was the secretary of the Ashram. Vyasji was the Hindi teacher. Everyone advised me to take lessons from them. At first, I took a dislike to Dixitji and tried to stay away from him because he was a widower who had married again. He was living with his second wife and his two children by the first wife. His second wife, Dayabehen, was also unwell—she had been mentally ill for some time and was recently cured. I became friendly with her. She had to bring up two children—Kusum, aged 10, and Satish, about six. These children became very friendly with my children and close to me. When Dayabehen’s first child, Lalli, was born in 1942, I went with her to the hospital. Dixitji’s brother’s wife was there. She exclaimed : “Oh, it’s a girl !” I said : “So what if it is a girl. I am also a female. I have daughters. If you find it difficult, give me the baby, I’ll

bring her up.” At that time, I was nursing Shrish. So I began to nurse Lalli too.

### **Quit India**

Three months later, in August 1942, the Quit India movement started. It was a very big crisis. AICC meetings used to be held at Wardha and we were the hostesses to delegates from all over India. We women were in the arrangement side, not in the discussion. Men went for discussions also.

The last meeting was in August 1942. We were told that most probably Bapu and other leaders—would be arrested immediately after the announcement of Quit India. We knew we should not yield the Ashram to the government. We were afraid they would confiscate it. As soon as we heard the arrests had taken place, we held a meeting of all the inmates and decided to close the Ashram. The students were to return to their homes.

The teachers had to decide whether they would disperse or would continue the movement. We discussed and decided that we would not go home. We would close the Ashram, stay elsewhere, and continue propaganda work. Women would go house to house and men would join the main programme, underground, carrying messages from place to place, and trying to prevent violence from breaking out. Dixitji went to Nagpur and then to Chhindwara. He was arrested on August 22. On August 9 Bapu was arrested ; the next day we closed the Ashram. Dayabehen and her children were sent to Bilaspur to her parents home.

On the 14th, Om left college, and came to me. She on her own had decided to join the movement. I had written a letter to the president of the students’ union of Presidency College, Madras, as an old student, saying it was the duty of the students who thought India needed freedom to leave their studies, come out and court arrest in a nonviolent way as Bapu had shown. I didn’t think it would have much effect. But recently I found this letter quoted in a book *Quit India*. All the



Left to right : Saras, Ratnamayi, Om, Mani and Shrish, 1944

students had read this letter and many had left college, inspired by it. Om also confirmed this, as she knew about it before she left college.

The grown up girls, about 75 of them, refused to go home. They insisted on remaining with us teachers and joining the movement. So, our programme started. The men used to bring pamphlets. At night, we would sit and copy them by hand. In the morning, we would go out in groups of five, singing nationalist songs like “*Jhanda uncha rahe hamara*” and

“*Uth jag musafir bhor bhayi*” and distribute pamphlets. Om, Saras and I were involved. I sent Mani and Shrish with the maidservant back to my mother at Adoor.

Om had an idea that on Rakhi day we should tie *rakhis* on the wrists of all the officials and policemen of the area. So we made *rakhis* of *khadi*, dyed them yellow, and after the *prabhat pheri* that day, the girls went to the policemen’s houses. They did not allow us to tie *rakhis*. Very politely, they said: “Sisters, forgive us. We cannot honour this *rakhi* so please don’t tie it.”

The constables who saw us coming, disappeared. Some women managed to forcibly tie *rakhi* on the police inspector. A few days later, he got himself transferred because he knew he could not do his duty as a brother to them. But most of the police were sympathetic to us— Soon after, all of them were transferred and new men came.

### In Prison

That time, nothing mattered except that we must do all that could be done to get the British out. Everyone was in that mood. I was no exception.

On August 27, Om, I and 10 other girls aged between 14 and 17 were arrested. The first 20 days were very difficult. All of us were locked into a space meant for eight persons. There were already eight women there. It was dark and rats were running about. We were given horrible food— hard maize *roti* and *dal* which looked like black water. The numbers arrested and pushed into this room increased every day, until it became impossible to lie down and difficult even to sit. The lack of hygiene was incredible. They confiscated our spinning wheels, but finally, on our insistence, gave them back. We used them as weapons to scare away the rats. Soon, several of the girls fell sick with upset stomachs and fever.

One day, when we were let into the courtyard, we flatly refused to return to the cell. They threatened to beat us but we still refused. Finally, they brought a van and took us to Nagpur jail.

The conditions there were much better. The jail superintendent there, Radhabai, was a very nice woman. She looked upon us as her younger sisters. She was a widow. The criminal women simply worshipped her. At first, we were C class prisoners but in a few days we were given B class privileges because we were detenus. There were no charges against us. This meant that we got better food— bread, butter and milk for breakfast and books to read. Our friends outside could send us things. We began to live there like one family. Om, Saras and I took

responsibility for anyone who fell sick. If the jail authorities treated us unreasonably, we thought we would go on fast to protest. But they did not trouble us much—a kind of adjustment took place.

The criminal women were very nice to us. We started classes for them in literacy and spinning. Every day, we used to have prayers—reading the *Bible*, the *Quran* and the *Gita*. Most of the criminal women were there on charges of murder. Some of them had been falsely implicated. One woman had killed her brother-in-law who was trying to rape her. Another had killed her illegitimate child. But they were such nice women, one could never think they were capable of killing anyone.

### More Than Sisters

For one and a half years, we lived together like this. There were two women to whom I became very close while in jail. One was Sarojbehen, the other was Raihanabeheh. We three were like daughters to Kakasaheb Kalelkar. These two were very good friends, in fact, more than sisters. But they were very different from each other in temperament. Sarojbehen was calm, affectionate, unable to find fault with anyone. Raihanabeheh had a short temper and a great sense of humour. She was a Muslim, the daughter of Abbas Tyebjee, a former president of the Congress. She was a great devotee of Sri Krishna. She used to compose poems and songs, and sing them. She had a beautiful voice.



Raihanabeheh and Sarojbehen



Kakasaheb Kalelkar

Kakasaheb was a widower and he had two sons. He stayed next to the Mahila Ashram and was devoted to Bapu. He was doing very good work—he wrote prolifically in Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati, English, even though his mother tongue was Marathi. Sarojbehen was introduced to him by Raihanabeheh and she became his secretary. Raihanabeheh also lived in the same house, as his daughter.

Raihanabeheh was very rich and being a Muslim, had inheritance rights in her father's property. She used to constantly help people. She helped me very often. It was in jail that we became very close. We disagreed on many things. But she was very straightforward and never hesitated to say what she thought. But if she realised she was in the wrong, she did not hesitate to apologise either.

In February 1943 we came to know that Bapu was going on a fast in Aga Khan palace, in protest against the violence that had broken out in the movement. We did not get newspapers but we heard the male prisoners talking loudly about it in their ward. I decided to fast along with Bapu. I didn't tell anyone. Raihanabeheh noticed that I was not eating and she tried her best to dissuade me. When nothing worked, she said "You are doing a lot of work,

serving those who are ill here. If you become weak, you will not be able to do this work. Is your obstinacy more important or your service?" Then I promised her that the day I felt too weak to continue my routine I would break the fast. But by god's grace, I was able to fast till Bapu broke his fast, after 21 days. I continued doing all the work, and just having the juice of one lemon and water every day. Of course, I was already used to fasting, as I was in the habit of keeping *nirjala* (fast without water) three times a week and eating only one meal on Sunday.

In October 1943 I was released.. Saras and Om were released in March 1943 and had gone home. Sarojbehen, Raihanabeheh, and I were the last to be released. I was released one week before them. I was anxious to return to Kerala. I had learnt from my children's letters, censored though they were, that they were being neglected, treated like orphans, even though staying with their father. When I reached the station, there was no one to receive me. I got into a bus to go home, and as the bus was passing the local school, suddenly a shout was heard: "Stop, stop." The bus stopped and the next moment, my son Mani had climbed in and was in my lap, crying: "Ma ! Never leave me again, never leave me," You can imagine how it affected me.

When my husband came home after a few days, he behaved as if I had never been away. He did not ask me anything about my jail experience. I also didn't bother. I was now wondering what to do. He didn't ask whether I was staying or going. I wanted to stay because my mother was sick and my children needed me. But how to survive on her pension of Rs 25 ?

About three weeks passed. Then I got a letter from Wardha, saying that since everyone had been released' and Bapu was to be released soon, the Ashram was being reopened and I should go. My salary would be Rs 75. If I went and took the children, they would be fed and educated, and we could manage somehow. My mother could manage on her pension. I t

called my husband and said : “If you want me to stay, say so now. Once I go, I won’t be able to return.” He said : “No, no, you should go. You will do well.” I asked him if he would help me get a job in Kerala. He was a well known literary figure by now. But he did not try for me. So I left and went back to Wardha.

The Ashram opened and the routine went on normally. Many men who had joined the movement had died in the interim and their womenfolk had come to the Ashram. Babu too had arrived. I renewed my practice of going for a walk with him every Sunday morning and talking to him about the Ashram. He was interested in every small detail. For example, once, some yarn was stolen. I announced that I would be on fast till it was returned. We were not interested in catching the thief. We just wanted the yarn back. On the second day, it was quietly returned. Babu told me : “You handled it rightly.”

I also discussed my personal problems with him. He would give his opinion but never force it on anyone. One example of this was before I went to jail. One day, Babu said to me : “You are allowing your daughter to study in a government college on a scholarship. This is not right. You should practise what you preach. How can you ask others to do what you cannot ask your daughter to do ?” I said : “Then the only alternative is for me to leave the Ashram.” “Why ?”

“I cannot call her here because my one aim is that she should be educated and enabled to stand on her own feet. To make my daughter independent is my first aim which I cannot forget or abandon.” He asked : “Is it necessary that she study English for this ?” I said : “Yes, it is necessary to find a job, today. Without a degree she cannot find a job. How will she live ? Will the Ashram feed her for ever ?”

He laughed and said : “No.”

I said : “Babu, let me ask you one question. Why did you call me here ? I had no background of political work. My family is an agricultural family but my



**Wedding photo of Saras and Sukumar**

parents were teachers. I studied in an English medium school and college and became a lecturer in a city. You called me to be trained as the principal here because I was an MA, nearly a PhD, with research experience, and you thought I was more capable than the others here who had a political background. If an MA degree is valuable in this institution, how much more will it be in the outside world. That is why I cannot discontinue her education.”

He listened quietly and said : “If that is what you think, let her continue.”

But a year later, Om herself flung away the scholarship and came to the Ashram to join the movement. Afterwards, she could not get into any college because she had a jail record. So she studied privately. She did not take any financial help from me. She worked in the Ashram and studied. Today, she is 62 years old. She has been my mainstay in life, never dependent as girls are supposed to be, always my companion in every crisis

In 1945 Saras’ marriage was arranged with a Congress leader, Sukumar Pagare. He had been with Dixitji in jail and Dixitji arranged the match. When I told Babu, he said : “It is all right. But you have found a Brahman for your daughter. I would have attended the marriage if he had been a Harijan.” I said : “I didn’t look for a Brahman, Babu. He just happened to be a Brahman. To tell the truth I didn’t look for a Harijan either. I accepted the person whom we came across and who seems suitable”

But I said : “I have another daughter. I will marry her to a Harijan, only you will

have to find the groom. He should have similar ideas and way of thinking as my daughter has.” He said : “Yes, I will find a boy.” I said : “She will be married when you find the boy.”

Well, neither did Babu find the boy nor did Om marry. She did not want to marry and I did not insist. I never insisted that any of my children should marry. My sons found partners for themselves and I accepted them.

So Saras was married. We spent a total of Rs 500 on the marriage. She wore a beautiful *khadi* sari for Rs 10. A few days later, her husband won the elections in Madhya Pradesh and became an MLA.

In those days, Babu was disturbed because the Hindu-Muslim riots had started and famine had broken out in Calcutta. I remember one incident. He was to visit the Ashram. We prepared a big map of India on the floor with different coloured foodgrains and lentils. When he saw it, he looked grave and called me aside. He asked : “What will you do with these grains ?” Before I could answer, Malatitai of the Ashram said : “We will make *khichdi* of it and eat it.”

Babu was satisfied and said : “Nothing should be wasted. People are starving. Food is the only thing that can satisfy human beings and keep them alive. I was pained to think these grains might be wasted.”

We used to put up small cultural programmes to entertain Babu. On Rakhi day, 1944, we put up a Hindi play in which the gods gather to discuss how to end the war on earth. One suggests that they call the greatest leader on earth and give him their powers. But Indrani objects, saying that war cannot be ended by war. She recounts the origin of Raksha Bandhan, saying that the war between the gods and demons ended only when she tied a *rakhi*, the emblem of women’s strength, on Indra’s wrist and endowed him with her power. So they decide to tie a *rakhi* on the wrist of the leader who can bring about peace. They call world leaders one by one, Churchill, Roosevelt, Hitler, the Japanese

emperor. Each one says that he will establish peace by defeating all the others in war. Then Narad comes and suggests that Mahatma Gandhi be called. The play ends with the *rakhi* being tied on Bapu's wrist.

When the play was staged, I was standing behind Bapu. He kept joking with me throughout. When Narad suggested his name., Bapu thought the actors would ask him to enter the play. He took up his *lathi* and was ready. But then an actor (Om) dressed as Bapu came on stage. Bapu said : "Oh, you have found another Bapu. Now you do not need me." And he laughed heartily.

We used to join Bapu for prayers when we could. His presence would not make any difference to our way of conducting the prayers. We used to sing *bhajans*—by Meera, Kabir, Surdas or by Raihanabehen.

Bapu would give a short message sometimes or answer questions.

In November 1944, my mother died. Om looked after her in the last days. She sent me a wire when, mother became seriously ill but by the time I reached, she had died. My husband came only after the cremation. Those days, he used to come home only once a fortnight or so. After this, he and I had hardly any contact.

In 1945 Dayabehen had her second child. We were like sisters by this time. She was ailing after the childbirth. Her child came into my lap. His name was Suresh.

### **Somewhat Disillusioned**

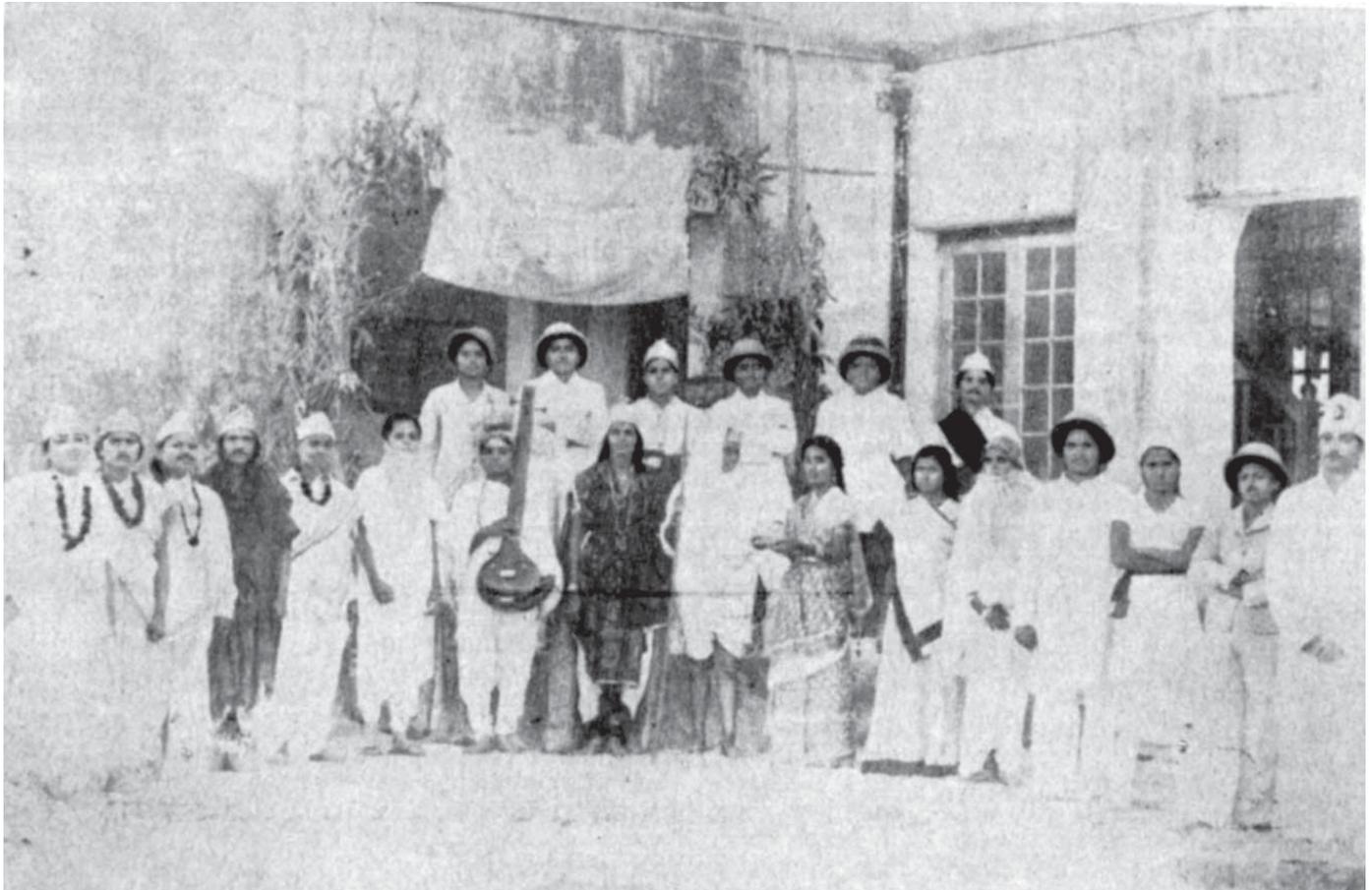
At this time, Bapu was busy, trying to quell the Hindu-Muslim violence in various places. The situation in the Ashram was deteriorating. New people had come who did not live by the principles of the institution. They were

more interested in pushing themselves forward. Some of them did not like Babuji (Mr Dixit) and wanted him to leave. In the meantime Dayabehen had developed TB so she could not stay in the Ashram. Ultimately, he had to resign. I was very upset at his being insulted like this. We had worked together—we used to go for Sunday walks together with Bapu.

In fact, the women of the Ashram were not better or purer than other women outside. They were like any other women in their behaviour, capable of quarrelling, jealousy, gossiping. Raihanabehen, Sarojbehen and I felt that many of the criminal women were far better human beings than many of the Ashram inmates.

I found that repression had negative effects at times, for instance in the Ashram, we used to eat plain boiled food but in jail some of the inmates used to quietly steal

**Cast of the play, Rakshapandhan, Mahila Ashram, Wardha, Centre : Om as Bapu**



spices and eat them. Similarly, Ashram inmates were to observe *brahmacharya* and many married couples too took the celibacy vow but were not able to observe it. Most of the followers were there because they were deeply attached to Babu. But some women were there because their menfolk had joined the movement, leaving them no other place to go. The men decided to follow Babu's ideals and the women of the family had no other choice.

Most of the followers came not so much to implement Babu's ideals as due to love and reverence for Babu. They worshipped him like a god. Even Jawaharlal Nehru could not implement all Babu's ideals, let alone others. Of course, some followers were completely dedicated to the ideals, for example, Mahadevbhai and Manubehen.

Babu walked alone on his path and placed complete faith in those who came to him. He disregarded any accusations against them. I don't know whether he couldn't always judge character right or he didn't want to, but those he thought were very good did not always turn out to be so good. There was no other reason for his failure. So I became somewhat disillusioned by Babu's followers.

Once Babuji (Mr Dixit) resigned, all the responsibility for the children fell on me. Babu was in Noakhali. I wrote and told him everything. He suggested it would be good if I went to the Kasturba Harijan Balika Ashram at Okhla, Delhi, and took charge as its principal. I agreed, and came to Delhi with all the children except Om and Satish. As Dayabehen was very ill I brought her to Delhi and admitted her to the TB hospital here.

Now I had to bring up five small children—Shrish aged six, Lalli aged four, Suresh aged two, Mani and Kusum. Om was in Wardha, studying and working at the Ashram. It was hard to manage on my small salary. In 1946, Dayabehen died. Her children refused to go with their uncle and aunt who offered to take them. The children insisted on staying with me. So the full



**Babuji and Ratnamayi**

responsibility was now mine. I had brought up Suresh since his birth and Lalli too.

### **Mother To Many**

While I was in prison, I had organised the care of many girls who were political prisoners. They started calling me "Amma" as my daughters did. By the time I was released, not only all the inmates but even the authorities had started addressing me as Amma. When I met Babu after his release in 1944, he met me with laughter and a slap on the back, saying: "I am sure you can talk in Hindi very well now." Before I could reply, one of the Ashram women, Kanchanbehen, said: "Babu, she talks only in Hindi now. And do you know who she is? She has become Amma to all of us who were in jail with her and to all in the Ashram too." Babu looked at me gravely and said: "Do you know the meaning of being called Amma. It brings many responsibilities with it. Do not allow

anyone to call you Amma lightly. Now you see, you cannot be Amma to me, you are my daughter. If it is impossible to stop others calling you mother, then try to become really Amma to them." And, Madhu, from that day, I have tried my best to follow his words. Wherever I went, this title followed me. And I have tried to do justice to it. Any child for whom I took responsibility became mine.

In April 1947, my adopted son Suresh died of diphtheria. This upset me and I was not keeping well. So I took leave without pay from Kasturba Ashram. At that time, Babuji was working in *The Hindustan Times*, Delhi. For a while in this year, I and the children lived with different friends—in Udaipur, in Vellore. Because I did not like the idea of Babuji and I living in the same house. So I went to Wardha and stayed a week with Raihanabehen. She was the only one who could give me practical advice. She said: "Either you completely cut yourself off from Babuji, which is not possible because of the children. Otherwise, you become one family. Because you have to live in this society. The best solution is to get married. He will like it, I know, but what do you say?"

I asked my daughters what they thought. Kusum said: "Whether you marry or not, you are my mother"; Saras was not very happy; Om had already suggested

### **Babuji with Sharad**





**Ratnamayi and Babuji at Mani's wedding, 1958**

that we should marry. So I wrote to Babu, he gave his blessings, and in December 1947 we got married. I had already broken off from my first husband. He was very upset. But the funniest part was that he had already remarried much earlier. Om maintained correspondence with him up to his last days. He died in 1961.

The children were the main reason for my getting married again. I was not averse to the idea but neither was I keen on it. If not for the children, I would not have remarried, but lived alone and looked after myself. At this time, Babuji was getting Rs 200 a month. I got a job in a school at Rs 125 a month, in 1950, my youngest son, Sharad, was born and in 1951 Kusum was married to one Surendranath Tripathi, a lecturer in Aligarh University.

Babuji and I divided the work of looking after Sharad between us. Still, it was hard. I had to cook for a dozen people and we always had some others staying with us—like when Om came in 1951, she brought one of her students who was very attached to her and there was one boy from Nagpur who looked up to me as his mother and he was looking for a job in Delhi, and Babuji's and the children's friends.

I revived my literary career at this time. I have written several books in English, Malayalam, Sanskrit and Hindi. I used to sit up late at night and write. Babuji encouraged and helped me greatly in my

writing.

Babuji changed his job many times. He used to get restless and change his job. In between, he was unemployed for two years. It was very hard to manage things then. All the responsibility was mine. Maybe it was my temperament to take on responsibility. In 1963 Babuji resigned from "The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi" where he worked the last eight years and after that, only wrote articles for newspapers. He never bothered about household expenses or how the house was run.

Through all this, Raihanabehen helped me a lot. Whenever I needed something, she would anticipate my need and send me money. Never once did I have to ask for it. She did it on her own—must be altogether not less than Rs 20,000 or so. There was no limit for her. She never made me feel I was begging. If not for her, I would not have been able to do what I did.

### **New Pastures**

I also registered for PhD in Sanskrit at Delhi University on the topic "Women in Sanskrit Drama." By this time, Mani graduated and joined the diplomatic service. He got married to a Tamilian girl. I said: "Anyone you bring is mine." Because I have always believed that if you love someone, you must love those whom they love. But I had a very hard time convincing Babuji because she was a Tamilian. Also,

she was her parents' only daughter and they wanted to give a lot of dowry. But I refused and said neither would we give anything nor should they. Our house is literally a symbol of national integration. My daughters-in-law are from Tamil Nadu, Bengal, Andhra Pradesh and the youngest, the daughter of a Gujarati father and Nagaland mother. My sons-in-law belong to Madhya Pradesh, UP, and Punjab. In 1959, Kakasaheb Kalelkar, who was a father figure to me, and was vicepresident of the India a Council of Cultural Relations, asked me to go to British Guyana as India's cultural representative. After I accepted, one Swami Purnananda of Guyana wrote a letter to Kakasaheb, asking him not to send a woman as she wouldn't be able to manage the work. When Kakasaheb told my husband, he said that I should not go in that case. Anyway, he did not much like my going for such a long time. Kakasaheb laughed and said: "I don't think you know your wife well enough." When Kakasaheb showed me the letter, I said: "What nonsense! I am going." I wrote a long reply to the letter, saying that woman is the mainstay of Indian culture, and if a woman cannot do the job, nobody can do it. So I went to Guyana, taking eight year old Sharad with me.

There, I stayed in the capital, Georgetown, but I travelled a lot in the interior. My predecessor had stayed only in the capital and run Hindi classes there. But when I received invitations to visit other places, I decided I must go. The first year, on Janmashtami day, I visited a total of 32 places and spoke in schools and

### **With her successor in Guyana**



temples, in a mixture of English and Hindi, because the people did not know either language well. Fifty two percent of the population of Guyana was of Indian origin. Their ancestors were shipped out there by the British to work as labourers on the plantations. After they were freed, the Indian community became the most prosperous, working their own land. They had a vision of India as their homeland, a paradise. But they were feeling isolated.

My speaking in temples created a sensation—crowds came—and after that, I received a spate of invitations to go and speak in different institutions. So I used to travel at weekends, taking Sharad with me, and, during the week, I took Hindi classes in Georgetown. I also organised staging of Hindi plays which were so successful that we raised enough money through tickets and donations to build a

### Speaking at her fare well function, Guyana



cultural centre in the capital. A big plot of land was donated by a Guyanese Indian, Mr Hariprasad. My Hindi students joined together and we made 10,000 cement bricks to build the centre. Indrani Rehman and her troupe came to Guyana and performed to raise money. The governor presided over the ceremony of laying the foundation stone, performed by the oldest living Indian migrant, then 108 years old.

All the Indians in Guyana whom I met—Hindus, Muslims and others—were very friendly and helpful to me in the two years that I lived there. Others too—Chinese, Africans—participated in the Hindi plays and other activities. We used to celebrate all Indian festivals, Muslim and Hindu, and national holidays, together.

Even today, 25 years later, many people in Guyana keep in touch with me. One whom I remember particularly is Beni Singh, then 23 years old, who was my right hand in all the work I did there. Although we were together only two years, he became a son to me. He looked after me and carried on the work even when I was hospitalised with asthma. Now, he is in London, doing good work among his people there.

After one year there, my husband started writing to me asking me to come back. But I kept quiet. In June 1959, Om came home from England where she had gone on a fellowship and found the house in Delhi a shambles. No one to cook, no one to look after anything. She took charge of the house and wrote to me not to worry.

After two years, even though the ICCR as well as the people in Guyana pressed me to stay on, I had to come back. I took my successors around to every place which I had visited and where I had set up Hindi classes, but later, they stayed only in Georgetown and just gave big parties for the rich and the diplomats. So that was the last the others outside Georgetown saw of any Indian cultural committee. When I left Guyana, there were 54,000 in the bank, the land and the bricks for the centre. I do not know what became of all this.

During this period, I completed my PhD with the help of my husband and Om. I

would write each chapter and send it to them, they would finalise the footnotes, type it, take it to my guide and get his approval which he gave without any difficulty. In 1960, the degree was granted without any viva, and the judges recommended it for publication immediately.

In 1961 I joined Miranda House as a lecturer in Sanskrit. To begin with, I was not much liked there because I was quite old and I was selected in preference to one of their old students. But, gradually, when they saw that I did my work and did not interfere with anyone, all the problems were solved. I directed the first Sanskrit plays in the college which won many prizes,

By the time I retired in 1974, all my responsibilities were complete. All the children were well settled. Mani is now Indian ambassador in Sri Lanka, Satish regional manager in Kelvinators, Shrish is with PTI, Sharad is an air force squadron leader, Om was a lecturer at the Central Institute of Education, Delhi, and has now retired.

In 1976, Babuji died suddenly of cerebral thrombosis while I was away in Kathmandu, visiting Shrish. I used to go to Kerala every two years to visit my father also until his death in 1972.

### Greatest Blessing

Throughout life, I have felt that my first responsibility is to my children. If not for them, probably I would not even have come out of the situation in my first husband's family. There would have been no interest in life. It was Om who saved me from that life when I even contemplated suicide. She was just two years old, my only child at that time.

She is not only my daughter, she is my mother. She has put up with everything, cheerfully. Can you imagine a 17 year old girl accepting her mother's second marriage and taking on three grown up children as her own responsibility? From the age of 17 she has been independent. She has really kept this house together. All the sisters and brothers, and their children—25 of them now—and grandchildren really adore her. No one will say a word against her. My greatest blessing is my daughter. □