

How We Poor Women Work Together

Karimabibi Ahmed Hussain Shaikh

by
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This profile of a Muslim woman rag quilt maker, tells the story of her struggle to build a dignified life for herself and her fellow workers. She began by organising the women of her neighbourhood to demand better wages and, gradually, with the support of SEWA, developed into a local community leader. Although in many respects exceptional, the story of Karimabibi and the union she represents, provides insights into the tortuous process of organising poor women

KARIMABIBI'S home is situated on the edge of Nagina Pol, a dense tangle of houses and narrow passageways in Dariapur, a Muslim section of Ahmedabad. *Pols* are a style of architecture and a way of living as old as the city itself. Ahmedabad was originally a Muslim settlement; its *pols* were devised as a method of defence by the city's Hindu population. Houses are grouped in irregular bundles, exterior walls and courtyards are shared and access to individual homes is provided by a labyrinth of narrow alleys. An entirely self-enclosed community, the *pol* is connected to main thoroughfares by one or, at the most, two large gates. In times of communal stress these entryways could be sealed and, in old times, the *pol's* inhabitants could easily defend themselves. During episodes of communal violence a community could preserve its existence; during times of peace, it could retain its identity. *Pols* have since become a standard feature of the old city, each holding different homogenous communities in a highly diverse city.

Being inside Nagina Pol is almost like being inside a home. The life of its

inhabitants cannot be contained indoors. Although many of the houses are large and sprawling, they are joint family homes and each of the many rooms regularly holds an entire family. Daily household chores and work for livelihood all take place in the shared space between the houses and constitute 'the common life of the *pol*. Men shave on the front steps. Women collect water at spigots on the

sidewalk. Dishes are being washed, food prepared. Children run around freely, tended by any mother. Off-duty rickshaws are hidden in bends of the road. A small mosque nestles between houses. Throughout the *pol* string beds are scattered in front of the houses where women sit all day long, sorting textile scraps they will sew into quilts. Frequently, the piles of scrap are as high as the figures squatting around them.

Karimabibi cuts a large figure in Nagina Pol. Her work with Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) has affected the lives of many neighbourhood women and their families and her role in the life of the *pol* has continued to expand over the years. Initially, Karimabibi gained prominence as a labour organiser, but now is counted on whenever the *pol* needs to contact organisations in the outside city. When the gutters break or the electricity fails, Karimabibi has them fixed. Experienced in dealing with officials and outsiders, Karimabibi is the *pol's* conduit for civic life. She is also looked to for advice of all sorts. Almost anyone on the street can point the way to her home,

Karimabibi



Karimabibi's house has been her home since she was married 29 years ago at the age of 18. But before it was her home it was her sister's home. Karimabibi was her husband's second wife; his first, Karimabibi's older sister, died prematurely. Immediately Karimabibi was married off to her sister's widower, 15 years her senior, and moved into her sister's house assuming responsibility for her children. "My father decided to give another daughter to the same husband", she explains. "Five children were there, who would look after those children?" Karimabibi considers these five nieces and nephews her own children, and she had two more daughters, one of whom still lives with her.

"This whole bungalow is mine. The lady sitting upstairs is my son's wife. He has three girls and two boys. Another daughter is staying on the next floor and she has seven sons.' Each of the three storeys has two small rooms. Karimabibi lives in one room on the ground floor which measures approximately 12 by 14 feet. An unusually high ceiling allows the room

to avoid looking cluttered. A series of shelves wrap around three of the walls displaying enamelled dishes and numerous vessels. A deep loft stuffed with enormous sacks of textile scrap extends from the back wall. Against the loft rests a bamboo ladder which provides access to the upper half of the room. Over the bed two photographs hang. One shows Karimabibi and her family and neighbours, all women, surrounding a goat they are gathered to slaughter. In the other, Karimabibi and the rest of the members of the SEWA executive committee are in front of the Taj Mahal. As a sideline to stitching, Karimabibi keeps three milch goats. All of her cooking pots are safely out of reach of the goats, piled high on a plank of wood which is suspended by a rope hung from the ceiling. But her home is also her workshop and against one wall stand two sewing machines, one electric, the other manual.

A diminutive woman, Karimabibi stands less than five feet tall, small with the exception of an oversized belly bulging out beneath the tightly drawn sash of her frock. When she is seated

on the steel frame bed at the far end of the room, her feet swing without touching the floor; a long greying plait, dwindling to nothing at the end, hangs down her back. Heavy black plastic framed spectacles perch on her minute nose. Her smile reveals an immense gap in place of a left incisor.

Speaking over the buzzing and clicking of the two machines being operated by her daughters, Karimabibi discusses her family life, "My daughters are like sons to me." In a culture where sons are prized and daughters are a burden, her feelings are atypical. "In this age boys just take money from their mother. For all of their life, the mother looks after them but they just fight and leave the house, forgetting their mother. So it is better to have daughters." Her younger daughter, Noorjahan, has married and moved to another part of the town where she lives with her husband's family and works for his family business, pressing the block printed bedcovers he sells. Husnabanu is 26 and unmarried, currently filling the role of the caretaking daughter Karimabibi describes.

As much comfort as Husnabanu gives her mother, however, an unmarried daughter, older than her married sister, is a financial stress. Before a marriage can take place, Karimabibi must gather the dowry and Husnabanu's age puts an extra pressure on Karimabibi to amass the dowry quickly. "I have been preserving for this daughter also - glasses, vessels, metal pots", she gestures towards the upper shelves of the room. "Each one costs at least Rs50. Every month I take one vessel. Rs 50 per month. If I ever have money then I buy - I try just to stuff the dowry aside. But I still need Rs 10,000 more. Four suits for the girl, four for the boy. a ring of Rs 900 for the boy, a cot, a mattress - everything. I prepared first



for this daughter (Husnahanu) but that one got married. I also gave a ceiling fan and an iron cupboard.

“Formerly, we were rich, and what we gave to one daughter, we have to give the same to all daughters. But now, in these days, it is impossible. If people are wealthy, with black money, they give all their daughters such nice, nice things. And our daughters see them and say see that lady there, her father gave her so much and my mother never gave me anything so nice. Then I feel so bad. So I must give. I gave Rs 17,000 for Noorjahan so I must spend Rs 17,000 now.” Financial burdens are felt all the more sharply by Karimabibi as she has been a widow for the last nine years. Her income used to provide a necessary supplement to her husband’s salary from a job in a textile mill. But since his death from TB, Karimabibi and her daughters have had to support themselves on their income from sewing textile scraps, known as *chindi* into quilts,

“In good times and bad times I am sewing *chindi*, with my whole family, with my whole community.” Like most of the women in Nagina Pol, Karimabibi has been stitching *chindi* all her life. *Parda* keeps the women at home but poverty compels them to earn and thus the home, by necessity, becomes the place of work.

Chindi stitching is one of the major small scale industries of Ahmedabad like many other trades such as rag picking and metal scrap collection, *chindi* stitching is dependent on the waste produced by the textile industry which dominates Ahmedabad. Remnants of cloth of strange sizes, oil stained or in some other way deformed and useless to the textile industry, are sold by weight. Contractors purchase the waste and provide it to women who sew them into quilts known as *khol*s. These quilts, usually dirty and of low quality, are used by a large portion of



the city’s poor. Both the women producing the *khol*s and the market for them come from the poorest stratum of the city’s population and thus the contractors who organise production are in an ideal position to exploit both the labour and the market. Although the *chindi* trade is as firmly established as the textile industry, the organisation of production does not depend on workshops and is not defined by an employer-employee relationship, with the result that the entire trade is considered part of the unorganised sector and no labour laws can be applied to its workers. In the absence of a formal structure to facilitate organising and without even a precedent or model for this type of organising the *chindi* stitchers of Nagina Pol were determined to improve their condition.

Karimabibi stitched *chindi* for over 20 years before she began organising a fight for more wages. Before any organising efforts were undertaken, the income and the condition of *chindi* stitchers was appalling. “In the early

70s a finished *khol* could fetch only 30 paise and even spending the whole day behind the sewing machine, a woman could produce about 12 *khol*s, earning only Rs 4 or 5 a day.” In the *chindi* trade, except for the *chindi*, the cost of all materials is borne by the women.

Karimabibi’s daily schedule for the first 20 years of her worklife was a gruelling marathon which continues to characterise the lives of numerous unorganised *chindi* stitchers. Confined to the house all day, the *chindi* stitcher is responsible for all household chores in addition to a more than full time job. Rising at 5 a.m., she would begin her daily household work such as fetching water and preparing breakfast for her family. At 6.30 a.m., she began cutting the *chindi* into strips, preparing it for sewing. At 8 a.m., kitchen duties again demanded her attention as she had to purchase and prepare lunch for her husband’s tiffin before he left for work at the mill. From 10 a.m. to 3.30 p.m. Karimabibi sat at her machine completing as many *khol*s as possible. Cleaning the floors, the clothing and vessels and preparing the evening meal occupied the afternoon from roughly 3 to 7 at which point she was free to return to her stitching. At 10 p.m., Karimabibi, along with all the *chindi* stitchers in the neighbourhood, gathered at the contractor’s house to turn in their *khol*s and collect their wages and more raw materials. After returning home, she washed the *chindi* she would be stitching the next day and finally went to bed at about midnight.

“We were getting such low wages. It was impossible to keep any money in hand and our need was great.” The women spoke among themselves of their grievances against their employers. As the market for *khol*s expanded, the merchants’ demand for the *khol*s increased and the price of



the *khols* went up. But the women saw none of this profit. The widows of the *pol* were working all day long, carrying a full load of household responsibilities and supporting their families on as little as Rs 5 a day. “We were always discussing and I explained again and again that we must fight.” At last, Karimabibi’s boldness prompted her to begin voicing her demand for more wages to the contractors themselves. Predictably, “the merchants protested against us, they threatened to stop our work. But I was not scared. While we worked, we were getting wages and they needed our *khols*.”

Taking an enormous risk by assuming a position of bargaining power, Karimabibi led the *chindi* stitchers of Nagina Pol into labour struggle. The women had no experience with labour organising, no sense that they did in fact have basic rights as workers, no game plan to follow and no safety net if their efforts to put pressure on the merchants failed. Having not yet heard of SEWA, they had no external support. Nonetheless, what they lacked in experience, they made up for in solidarity. Although not organised with the objective of labour struggle in mind, Nagina Pol already housed, at this stage, a cohesive group of women, bound by the hardships of their work and their common struggle against poverty.

The most immediate need of poor women is easy access to credit, a focus of organising all over the country. In Nagina Pol a small scale credit system had spontaneously emerged from the tightknit community, which provided a base for later organising. “Some of the women, like myself, had a little more money than the widows who were so poor. In difficult times I used to give Rs 50 to widows in need and others

would loan me money when I was in need. I never made a group; there was no group system.” But an informal organisation of women had grown out of their shared needs, and it provided solidarity and mutual support. “I did not form a group for fighting purposes”, but when the struggle began, the women were organised and ready to fight.

The merchants began to follow up on their threats, sometimes refusing to pay the women their wages. “If the merchant gave us money every day, then we would prepare bread. But our condition was not good. On account of the fighting, sometimes the merchant wouldn’t pay us, so for one day we would be unable to get food.” In such situations, the women could make do with the support of their neighbours but many began to fear for their livelihood. They could not hold out this way indefinitely. Meeting more and more frequently, their discussions at last gave way to a plan.

“I started to stockpile the readymades in my own house. All the women began keeping their work at their homes. We didn’t go at 10 p.m., any more. If the merchant needed *khols*, he would have to come to the house.” The merchants had been giving the women one jute sack full of *chindi* which lasted approximately eight days, at which point the women would return the empty sack to the merchant for a refill. But as the demand for *khols* steadily increased, the women began asking for more *chindi*, taking two sacks at a time and in this way accumulating raw materials. The women never stopped stitching but they refused to return the finished product. “The merchant had to wander further in one direction, then backward again if he wanted the product.”

“We told the merchant, ‘Your goods are in our houses. If you need them, come take them away, but give us our

wages on time and give us more. We want 50 paise per *khol*.’” The merchants were beginning to feel a loss but they refused to discuss wages with the women. Almost 150 women were involved by this time and they selected Karimabibi to go to the merchants and force their case. Afraid to go alone, Karimabibi chose four women to accompany her. Taking their finished *khols* with them, the women restated their terms. The merchants responded by saying they would cut off the women’s supply of *chindi*

“We want Rs 6 a day”, Karimabibi repeated.

“But if we give you no work, you will be unemployed.”

Karimabibi was undaunted, “We were not frightened”, she said. “I was confident he would give us more work. He needed us. I had to give some faith to the women with me. ‘Do not be scattered’”, I told them. The merchants finally relented and agreed to pay the women Rs 6 per dozen *khols*, approximately Rs 6 a day, 50 paise instead of 60 paise per *khol*.

The women continued to receive 50 paise a *khol* for the next two years. But Karimabibi felt insecure with the arrangement. Two other cousins from her father’s family were themselves merchants and thus she had been exposed to both sides of the battle. She had little faith that the merchants would keep their side of the bargain the minute they found a cheaper way of getting *khols*. Determined to get the new wage signed into law, Karimabibi had no idea how to go about it. “I wanted the labour commissioner to know about Rs 6 a day. But I was a bold one. I also thought each and every year we must fight, first Rs 6, then Rs 10, like that.”

A relation of one of the men in the *pol* was a textile employee and a leader in the Textile Labour Association (TLA). “I talked to that boy and I told

him ‘We fought like this, we need more wages, but we also need people behind us.’” The TLA member suggested that Karimabibi consider joining SEWA and discussed the *chindi* stitchers’ struggle with Elabehn Bhatt, SEWA’s founder. Four SEWA field workers came to Dariapur to learn about the work. “These women told me to gather more women like myself and make one union of *chindi* ladies. I went door to door. The people in my community knew me. They had been getting Rs4 and now they were getting Rs 6, so they knew me well.”

Some women were reticent to join a union and commit themselves to organised labour struggle. They were frightened that increased involvement might draw them out of their houses, and out of *parda* more and more frequently. Karimabibi’s husband raised no objection to her organising work as long as she was receiving no salary. “Many of the husbands thought ‘We must get more wages, let our women go’” but others had to be persuaded.

But the relaxation of *parda* involved in labour organising was an obstacle not just for the husbands to overcome. Many of the women themselves were not ready to leave the home and take up a public life. “No man, no outside person can see a woman’s face in our caste. The ladies put socks on their hands when they go out. Women do not have the right to show their bodies. It might not be good but in our caste we have this. Still, one has to fill the stomach. ‘Do you again want more wages?’ I asked them. ‘Then come out of your houses’, I told them.”

Slowly, the women came out and Karimabibi and her neighbours organised numerous meetings at which the women discussed their common problems and Karimabibi explained the purpose of membership in a union. “We would call a meeting, and women from that surrounding area would go and gather everyone. One day in Dariapur we had three meetings. I used to hold

all these meetings myself and I remember one that had as many as 50 ladies.”

With SEWA’s guidance and support the women fought for a raise to 70 paise per *khol* as a provisional step towards reaching their goal of Re 1. The success of the *chindi* workers’ union and Karimabibi’s central role in it, however, brought enormous tension into her family life. Two of her cousins were themselves contractors and many relations in her father’s family were involved in the *chindi* business, and thus Karimabibi felt compelled to keep her work with SEWA a secret. “I had done too much work so I had to hide. I never talked to my cousins. At that time I had only one thing on my mind, ‘We must fight a case in court, we will get one rupee.’ I was afraid because if my cousins had asked me, I would have had to tell them the truth. ‘Yes, I will fight a case against you.’ So I hid away all my work of organising women.

“Then I realised that my cousins knew what I was involved in. So one evening I gave an example to my cousin. ‘Suppose’ I told him ‘that there is a father-in-law and his daughter’s husband. The father has a mill and the

husband is a worker in that mill. If a labour problem comes to that mill, will the father side with the husband or act as a mill owner?’ My cousin gave no answer and so I put the point to him that ‘We are cousins but I cannot remain with you because you are a merchant and I am a worker.’ My cousin told me ‘See, you are working with workers, you remain on the workers’ side, we are on merchants’ side so we will remain here only. But our family and house relations will remain the same.’ Through all these times of agitation our relations have been good. We don’t fight inside the house.”

Although determined to fight a court case if necessary, the *chindi* stitchers hoped to settle their demand through negotiations. SEWA called repeated meetings between the *chindi* workers and the prominent merchants. At the first two meetings several merchants attended, including Karimabibi’s two cousins. But when the women continued to demand Re 1 a *khol* the merchants stopped showing up for the meetings. Finally SEWA wrote a letter to every *chindi* merchant in the city, demanding their presence, at a meeting to resolve the issue. Not a single merchant came.

Again, the *chindi* stitchers came up with a novel way to put pressure on the merchants. “The merchants kept no books when they gave us our wages. They never asked us to sign, we never put the thumb impression. We wrote a complaint to the income tax office. ‘Something must be wrong, we think, you go see the books of the merchants’.”

Frightened, the merchants still refused to meet the women, and instead appealed to the government officials in the state capital of Gandhinagar. Inverting the reality of the conflict, the merchants begged the government not to shut their businesses on account of their shoddy book keeping. They explained that they were giving work to poor widows and if their businesses





were closed these poor women would be unemployed.

Karimabibi responded by going herself to visit the same office in Gandhinagar.

Having lived her whole life in Ahmedabad, Karimabibi had never been to Gandhinagar - she had never been out of town on her own. "I had to go. I knew that I could no longer trust the merchants. I knew we were being cheated and the merchants were even taking our names to do it." The government officer acting as the arbiter between the merchants and the women reinvestigated the case and assigned it to the labour commissioner of Ahmedabad.

The labour commissioner appeared sympathetic to the women's case but by this point Karimabibi had little faith in anyone. "Now you are saying, 'Yes, yes, we will help you', she told the labour commissioner, "but afterwards you will not do our work." Providing a list compiled by SEWA of all the merchants, the women pressured the commissioner to help them resolve the conflict. At last, the commissioner wrote a letter demanding the presence of all the merchants at a meeting.

On the appointed day, all the SEWA *chindi* stitchers and several SEWA organisers sat on one side of the room, the city's *chindi* merchants on the other side. Karimabibi faced not only her two cousins but numerous members of her family who were involved in the business and supported the merchants' position.

"Now talk, both of you, and settle your quarrel", the labour commissioner said, opening the meeting. Gesturing towards Elabehn he requested her to present the women's position,

"I will not talk. This lady is in need", she said pointing to Karimabibi. "She is in need and if she has any problem her problem must be solved by her."

"We need a wage of one rupee per *khol*", stated Karimabibi simply.

The merchants responded by saying they could afford no more than 70 paise and, in order to counter any sympathy the commissioner might have had for the women, they went further and accused the women of stealing *chindi*.

"But you are giving the *chindi* by weight and you are taking the *kholes* by weight. How can we be stealing? The government has one rule - in every 10kg, 200 gms can be missing. While cleaning and cutting into strips 200 gms are lost."

"In any case, it is the ladies' thread that is wasted as well as the *chindi*. There is no question of stealing." The commissioner lost patience. "These women are making too little money and you claim you are running at a loss, but what of their costs? What is the rate of needles?"

"We don't know."

"What is the cost of keeping the machine oiled?"

"We don't know."

"You can ask them the price of one metre of cloth and they will give you a reply immediately", interjected Karimabibi.

"There is no need to talk like this. If you want to fight, fight in court. I find in favour of the women."

After winning their fight for wages, Karimabibi was immediately looking for more ways to increase the women's earnings and their control over their work. "Elabehn told us, if you are taking two bags of *chindi*, you could sew it and sell it directly. You must not work on contract for somebody else." Although finding markets for *kholes* was a simple matter it was far more difficult to get access to raw materials. Perseverance paid, however, and in 1982 Karimabibi and 31 fellow *chindi* workers founded the Sabina Co-operative. "Before SEWA, we were fighting and we got Rs 6 a dozen. After joining SEWA, I started saying that we need Rs 10. Rs 6 was OK but after buying thread, needles and oil, we were left with so little. Then we succeeded in

getting Rs 12. Now the standard wage is Rs 15 a dozen and at our cooperative, Sabina, the women get Rs 18."

The ability of Karimabibi and her colleagues been blunted by the depression which has seized Ahmedabad in the last eight years. "Now all the factories and mills are closed, many people are unemployed. So whatever work there is for Rs 15, they will take it. They might not get any work. If we fight, the merchant says, 'I know other ladies I can pay Rs 10. They are in need and they will do the work for Rs 10.'"

Since 1980, 70 percent of the textile mills in Ahmedabad had closed. It is difficult to make organising appear worthwhile in this atmosphere of fear and scarcity. The women in non-union work arrangements live in fear at home and at work and, consequently, cannot help being frightened of SEWA. "They eat and beat, that is all they do", says one, describing their unemployed husbands. It is difficult for such women to get the wages to which they are legally entitled. Fighting for their proper wages threatens their livelihood and they are the sole support of their families. "If the mill starts working, they'll have no fear."

But these are not the only conditions that endanger the gains made by the *chindi* workers. In the last few years Ahmedabad has suffered not only a staggering contraction of the economy but a string of communal riots which have destroyed social stability and thrown much of the city's population into even deeper poverty.

Starting on March 18, 1985, continuing through till the end of the year and for four more months in 1986 much of the old city of Ahmedabad, especially Dariapur, lived in a state of war. The agitation of caste Hindus against government reservations for Harijans led to a *bandh* call for the entire city on March 18. In Dariapur several shops and one restaurant ignored the call. That night a campaign of burning and looting started, beginning with Nagina Pol. During

these communal riots vast portions of poorer neighbourhoods were destroyed and much of the city was paralysed for months at a time. Approximately 500 deaths, 148 days of rioting, 7,660 arrests, Rs 2,425 crores business lost and Rs four to nine crores worth of property destroyed, left few unaffected. Neighbourhoods were razed and movement restricted. During these periods of strife Karimabibi extended her work for solidarity among *chindi* workers to working for solidarity among all the poor of Ahmedabad.

The poor, especially the Muslims, who as a rule occupy the bottom of the economy, suffered especially. While the closing of the mills has undercut the women's ability to demand their legitimate wages, communal unrest upset the feeling of unity between the *chindi* stitchers and poor self employed women of other trades and religions, and potentially destroyed the solidarity which had brought them so many gains.

Dariapur, Karimabibi's neighbourhood with its exclusively Muslim population sandwiched between Hindu areas, was especially hard hit. From her roof Karimabibi can point out the gashes in surrounding buildings made by bottle bombs and the chips left by bullets. Living on the edge of the *pol*, Karimabibi's house is only two houses away from a large residential building owned by Hindus. "This building is the beginning of the Gujarati area. These people were good to us but they left because of the fighting and shifted to good areas on the other side of the river and left their

homes closed and empty. Other people came into their houses and were throwing bombs and everything down on us."

While the wealthier Hindus could afford to get out, the poor of both religions were left in the midst of a war. Pointing to another building less than 20 metres off, Karimabibi explains the story behind the difference in materials used to build the upper two storeys. "The wall separating those houses from here used to be lower. They made these walls higher because they



thought 'There are more Muslims here so they will kill us'."

Instead of being an easily defensible whole, the *pol* was immensely vulnerable to the city that had grown up around it on all sides. The proximity between houses, the network of shared space and the greater height of the building bordering the *pol* meant no place was safe. In some cases, Muslim and Hindu families even shared a wall. Once inside, an assailant could jump from terrace to terrace and reach the heart of the neighbourhood. Even remaining outside, the Hindus, being wealthier, had larger and taller homes from which they could throw stones, rag balls of

kerosene and petrol. "People were firing pistols from windows, they were shooting into houses and throwing bombs into courtyards. The houses are all attached so if a fire starts many are destroyed. In one riot, during two and a half hours, 72 bombs were thrown in Dariapur. I used to put soil and stones in big vessels on the terrace. If anyone came to harm us, we used to throw this over. If the building was burning we used this to drown the fire. I was so lucky, I never had to hurt anyone. Not only were lives being lost and homes destroyed but the rioters took

special care to destroy the tools of trade of the self employed. Sewing machines, bicycles and pushcarts were destroyed and the majority were left with no way to earn a living.

The only possibility of controlling this violence, it seemed to city authorities, was to impose a total curfew 24 hours a day. "No moving was allowed, we had to remain in this room only. Two

policemen were at that end of the *pol*, two at this end." Pointing to the stone lattice work over her door and window, she continues: "We used to stuff cotton and cloths into those ventilation screens so no light could get out and nothing could get in. At night we had to sit inside and keep it dark so no rays would go out. If light was visible, bombs could have been thrown." In 1986, curfew was imposed for 172 consecutive days. Karimabibi and her daughters were three in a room. Most families surrounding Karimabibi were eight or 10 to a room the same size.

The 24 hour a day curfew forced people to remain in homes which were never meant to hold their lives. The

curfew did not allow them to go out and make their living or to do the daily work of keeping their household. Income was lost and families in riot torn areas were forced to wait for unreliable municipal relief. The less fortunate whose houses were completely destroyed were removed to government relief camps. For those who remained in the city it was a struggle to maintain any standard of cleanliness or order as the women were no longer permitted to go outside to collect water and do cleaning and washing. The

chillis, you bring the vegetables.’ Everyone used to rush as the shops were only open for two hours and in two hours the shopkeeper couldn’t possibly sell to 100 people. Some people would get the goods and the rest were left standing in the queue. So sometimes, after hours, a woman would be left standing outside and if the policeman caught her he would give her a punishment, ‘You have to stand outside here only’, and he would leave us on the street corner for as long as he decided. If it was a Muslim or a

became a necessity for survival. The women of the *pol* emerged during this time; instead of spending all their days in the house, women were suddenly the only participants in public life. “In curfew, only ladies could come out of the houses in order to get things. No men. We women thought, we must come out, no men are there and we need our daily goods. 172 days of curfew and we women used to roam like anything.”

Surrounded by violence, the women, of necessity, took the role of working for survival and thus also for peace — bringing about reconciliation was the only way their community could continue to exist. Collecting and distributing food and water and harbouring one another, the women saw that they had no personal interest in the conflict except that the fighting should end. Losing patience with the conditions they were forced to live in, they began to use their relative freedom and power during the curfew to protest against the violence of the Hindu and Muslim communalists and the police.

On June 21, 1985, Muslim women spontaneously came together to protest and to retaliate against the violence. “During the curfew the Hindus Celebrated Rathayatra with a procession carrying Krishna, Subhadra and Sahadeo on a chariot and all were worshipping it. We had just finished *namaz* and their procession started towards our *pol*. The police said, ‘There is curfew there, you cannot proceed.’ But there were 5,000 of them and a fight started. There was throwing of stones and broken glass and bottle bombs. Guns were used and fires started.”

Led by Karimabibi, the women of many Muslim areas decided to openly disregard curfew and take out a procession, protesting the violence of the Hindus, the Muslims, and the police. “I thought to myself, we must bring all ladies out, and I gathered the Muslim ladies from Dariapur. We went out 1,000 of us, and we sat. The police



livelihood of most of the women was suspended as they were no longer allowed out of the house to return their readymades to the merchants. Poverty, sickness and a violent frustration overtook the area.

A small relaxation of curfew for women doing housework was a token gesture. “Every three days two hours were given. We had to get all the vegetables and provisions and one lady cannot do all this in two hours. We had to divide the work among ourselves this way: ‘You bring the wheat and rice, you bring the oil and

Hindu area and we were of the other community then we were afraid they would throw us down.”

It was impossible for the women to provide for their families under these circumstances and they began to break curfew. “One gent used to sit upstairs to see if any policeman was coming. If not, we used to do our work, bringing the water and everything. When the policeman went away we would leave the house. But they would come all of a sudden and we would go into anyone’s house.” The cooperation that had always characterised the life of the *pol*

stopped the women. One was carrying a stick of bamboo and I took it away from him. We told them. 'None should fight. All the women are frightened now. You must protect us too'."

Through such actions, the women of Nagina Pol became a presence for secularism in their own community and Karimabibi worked for secularism in the city at large. But Karimabibi's secularism does not see a watering down of religious identity as a prerequisite of communal harmony. "The women would say to me, 'Karimabibi, aren't you frightened to move outside in this way? So many have been killed.' But I told them, 'What is there? I'll die for my religion.' The Hindus are Hindus and the Muslims should be allowed to be Muslims and peace and cooperation was necessary for the survival of all the poor regardless of their religion.

"Dariapur was a terrible place while that rioting was going on. But Hindu ladies would see me on the streets and say 'How are you, Karimabibi?' and I asked them the same. During these times many ladies who were able were still gathering at SEWA and at 11a.m., they were having prayers. Outside of SEWA one army inspector was posted to keep order. He heard the noise of

the ladies prayers and he thought, What is going on in there? He went up and saw in the prayer room all Hindu and Muslim women praying together and he was surprised. He told me, 'See outside how everyone is fighting and inside the ladies are praying together'."

Getting a six month curfew pass through SEWA, Karimabibi began moving around the city with SEWA organisers, working to identify potential recipients of government relief and helping victims of the violence apply for relief. "We were moving everywhere in the city, Dariapur, Saruspur, Gomtipur. Many ladies from SEWA were involved and many of them were moving out of their homes for the first time in months. We were Hindu women, Muslim women and the backward cast ones were with us. Turn by turn everyone was going. Daily everyone was taking lunch together. If someone's *lari* was burnt or broken, they could fill a form and get help. Or if their mattress or home was destroyed, they could get help. I was not afraid during this work. Many came to have a lot of confidence in SEWA. The women thought. 'They will back us up.'"

SEWA has backed up the women and Karimabibi has been a crucial element

in the support provided. The last couple of years have been more peaceful. Although the number of mills has continued to decline, the city has seen no communal violence since 1986. Recently Ahmedabad even braved a strike by the police without any violence. Karimabibi has been vice president of SEWA for nine years now, reelected for three successive terms.

Being a minority in the city, Muslims are also a minority in SEWA and Karimabibi is a strong voice representing Muslim women in the labour movement of the self employed. Focusing on the plight of home based workers, she is a strong supporter of protective legislation and worker co-operatives for all home based workers, Muslim and Hindu. SEWA, being a place where Muslim women can freely congregate outside the home, has also become a base for work towards establishing an equitable divorce law for Muslim women. Sitting on the floor of her house one evening during Ramzan, she and her daughters circled one big plate of food and prepared to break their fast. "See now", she explained, "We all work and prepare this food. We all take what we need. This is how a cooperative works. This is how we poor women work together..."

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