From Phansi Yard

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My Year with the Women of Yerawada

Sudha Bharadwaj

juggernaut

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To all the unjustly incarcerated
And for Maaysha, who suffered my absence the most

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Introduction

An early morning knock on my door took me into a world of incarceration, first at home and then in prison, where I wrote the sketches of women prisoners and comments on jail life that comprise this book. Who was I up to that moment and how had I lived my life? The editorial team at Juggernaut Books felt readers would want to know. But when I sat down to compress six decades into a chapter, I thought how much easier this would be if they just asked me some questions. They did, and here are my responses.

Your life comes across as a series of unusual choices, the path less travelled, as you've put it. For example, you gave up American citizenship at twenty-one. How did you come to acquire it, and why did you relinquish it instead of packing your bags for America like so many other IIT graduates?

I was born on 1 November 1961 in Boston in the United States (US), where my parents, Krishna and Ranganath Bharadwaj, were both postdoctoral fellows in economics. I was probably an unplanned baby as my parents were on a shoestring budget.

That's how I got American citizenship – by birth. We returned to India when I was about one, so I have no memories of America. But photographs of me as an infant show me being babysat by our neighbours – an immigrant Russian couple and their son Gregory. Apparently, I was angelic with them, sleeping throughout the day, only to keep my tired parents up all night. The photos show a thin Krishna Bharadwaj cradling me. She has dark circles under her eyes but is nevertheless radiant in her motherhood.

My mother told me that Professor P.C. Mahalanobis, then associated with the Planning Commission, had come to talk to bright young Indian economists in the US encouraging them to join in the nation-building effort. My mother was one of those who responded with enthusiasm.

So your parents returned to India?

They came back to work in India**.** But they effectively separated when I was around four, even if their formal divorce came much later. Though I remember some joyous indulgences with my father, I was terrified by the loud, raised voices when my parents argued. I remember locking myself in a bathroom and having to be cajoled to come out, and hugging my mother's knees and pleading during an ugly fight: 'Oh, why don't you just accept whatever he is saying!' According to my mother that was when she decided she needed to part ways with my father. She accepted the opportunity of a fellowship in Cambridge, which came on the invitation of Piero Sraffa – a brilliant Marxian economist

and close associate of Antonio Gramsci. Professor Sraffa had been deeply impressed by an excellent review my mother had published of his cryptic classic, *Production of Commodities by Means of Commodities*. For me, this meant a childhood in the university town of Cambridge, in the United Kingdom, and primary schooling at the Newnham Croft County Primary School there. There were some hard days too. My mother was diagnosed with TB and my grandmother had to come to live with us – a non-English-speaking nine-yard-sari-wearing conservative Brahmin lady, shivering in the Cambridge winters – but one who nevertheless loved her rebellious daughter.

You were a three-woman family. How did that work?

I think my grandmother suppressed my spontaneity and made me very dutiful and obedient, and a bit cowardly too: 'Don't be a trouble to your mother!' – something that I still resent in my character. But from the hindsight of an adult, I have to admit she rescued us. I made my first very good friend – Jinny, Tanjam Narasimhan – who got back in touch recently after half a century. Jinny's mother Sita was also a single mother and a professor of English literature. We lived a lot in each other's houses. I have a distinct memory as a child of helping my mother proofread one of her most famous works, *Production Conditions in Indian Agriculture*, sitting with copies fanned out in front of me and marking in the corrections as she read them out. My mother never had any intention of settling abroad, so when racism started rearing its ugly head even in a liberal university town like Cambridge, with our key

disappearing from under the doormat one day, or my getting threatening phone calls with sexual innuendoes when I was home alone, she made the move back to Delhi. I was ten or eleven when we came back, after six years in England.

Was your mother a role model?

My mother was the most important influence in my life before I met the trade union leader Shankar Guha Niyogi, though like all daughters of an awe-inspiring mother, I resented being in her shadow. She was not just a brilliant economist but a gifted singer of Hindustani classical music. Her values of simplicity and sincerity, respect towards colleagues and subordinates alike, love of students and teaching, I think I imbibed by sheer osmosis. She was an undeclared socialist since her childhood. Her home town Karwar, in Karnataka**,** was deeply influenced by the socialists who were organizing Goa's liberation movement from across the border. In 1972, she set up the Centre for Economic Studies and Planning at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) with other brilliant heterodox economists like Professor Sunanda Sen, Professors Prabhat and Utsa Patnaik, Professor Amit Bhaduri, etc. This Centre, with its unique curriculum, was eventually to produce the most insightful and critical work on the economic development of India, and she poured a lot of energy into it. I used to joke that the Centre was more her baby than I was. It was not easy being the only child of a very busy woman; I might have occasionally felt bad about her not being there to open the door when I came home from school. But she

certainly expanded my horizon of what a woman could be, and with grace and confidence.

You spent your formative years living on university campuses. Did you like that life?

I have idyllic memories of my Cambridge childhood – of my mother punting down the river Cam in her sari, feeding the ducks by the river, our free school lunches and milk (since Thatcherite cuts had not yet kicked in), and many Indian students dropping in for vegetarian meals and advice. I loved the children's section of the city library where my mother would drop me when she was busy, and the friendly librarian too, and that's where I developed my love for reading.

My schooldays were spent in the JNU campus, and I studied at the Central School in the IIT Delhi campus close by. In those days, children of professors and karmacharis (workers) studied together in the school and we went to school in Delhi Transport Corporation buses. It meant that we were never cocooned, as upper-middle-class kids are today. The JNU campus was a really lovely place to grow up in as a child. It was an undulating terrain with lots of trees and Nalanda-like brick buildings. It had the scope for long walks and was extremely safe, with young girls and boys moving around till late at night. There were many cultural events and discussions around current topics in the hostel messes and on the lawns. Elections were neither a show of muscle nor of money power but rather a time of heated discussions on esoteric political topics, like 'Is Albania really communist?' I recall as a teenager

seeing faculty and students gathering on the lawns in front of our house to sing '*Surya ast ho gaya, gagan mast ho gaya*' (The sun has set and the sky is afire with joy), a popular song of the pre-Independence Indian National Army, on the occasion of Vietnam's liberation. I also remember the triumphant early morning procession of students celebrating the defeat of Sanjay Gandhi and Indira Gandhi in the 1977 elections. The atmosphere both in the campus and in my house was that we had to work hard to change our country for the better.

Why a five-year maths degree at IIT Kanpur? What did you plan to do with it?

I was a pretty good student at school and loved history, literature and mathematics. Charles Dickens was my favourite writer in childhood, and when we returned to India the transition to learning Hindi was made easier not only by my fortunately quick grasp of languages but even more by my falling equally in love with Premchand. The history of the freedom struggle was a passion with me since school, and still is. Mathematics I was good at, though interestingly, not at arithmetic; it was more the logic, patterns and abstraction that I would find beautiful and fascinating. Given a choice I would have studied all three, but in those days no school could have possibly permitted such a crazy combination of subjects. So like all bright students, I got pushed towards the science stream and therefore mathematics.

Two of my best friends at Central School – Damanjeet and Bandana – were giving entrance examinations for the medical

and engineering streams and joined coaching classes to do so. It was more a peer group thing for me to join too, and so I attempted the IIT Joint Entrance Examination and was lucky. That year the maths exam was pretty tough and I hear that the marks in maths became the threshold for admission, so my definitely poorer performance in physics and chemistry may not have counted. I got through, though my rank was mediocre (1142, I remember, and for all your years in IIT that number would be stuck to you), but I got into a five-year integrated MS maths course, and very honestly I had never wanted anything else.

What was the IIT experience like, the maths and the rest? There were very few women there, weren't they, in the early eighties?

IIT Kanpur had a sprawling campus neatly laid out in a very American fashion – the roads and lanes and even hostels had numbers, not names. We were repeatedly told how we were the 'cream of the nation' – the toppers from all over the country thrown together. The atmosphere was intensely competitive and the schedule harrowing – quizzes, 'mid-sems', 'end-sems', projects, practicals . . . But for those of us who cared less about grades and wanted only to learn, there was a huge, well-stocked library, some excellent professors who were a delight to listen to, and some good friends to 'mug' (study) with. IITK was cruel to those who didn't 'fit in'. Like those who came from non-English-speaking backgrounds and had to do 'slow pace' classes; or the PhD students, derisively called

Phuds, who were generally from smaller cities and towns. The semester we joined, I remember being part of a silent angry procession of students mourning the suicide of a Dalit student who had not been able to complete his final semester.

And of course, among the minorities were the girls! In 1979 we were considered a 'big batch' of girls – we were 8 among a class of 250 boys. In some batches there were just two or three. I remember all of us as 'freshers' going to a Friday evening film show in the auditorium, ignoring the words of caution from our seniors. The moment there was a hint of sex in the film, the entire crowd went berserk – hooting, cat-calling, forcing the projection assistant to rewind. We walked out of that concentrated mix of lust and misogyny in twenty minutes flat . . . We girls were often subjected to pranks – someone taking the air out of our bicycle tyres, an anonymous note or some graffiti. But within a couple of semesters, most of the women would pair up with someone, and then after that there would be this quite liberal acceptance of the couple, with the women even staying over in the men's hostels. The girls' hostel was a really friendly zone. Unlike the competitive atmosphere of the men's hostels, which were structured by year, at the GH we had seniors and juniors and PhD students all mixed together. There was always a mature shoulder to cry on or someone to help with tough assignments.

When did you realize you would not be going the way of other IIT graduates?

I learnt a lot at IITK – and not all of it was academic. Though, of course, thanks to Professors U.B. Tewari, Kalyan Bannerji,

A.P. Shukla and V.K. Deshpande, my foundation in science and mathematics was well laid. We also had excellent teachers in the humanities, and fortunately it was compulsory for all IITK students to take a humanities course each semester – hopefully it made them less technocratic. So there were Professors Vinod Jairath, Mohini Mallick and Leelavati Krishnan teaching us sociology, philosophy and psychology. But I learnt the most from a little Marxist study group of students and teachers with whom we visited flood-devastated villages in nearby Unnao, participated in cultural programmes of the mess workers of IITK and learnt about the hardships of textile workers of the closed mills of Kanpur city. We studied about the freedom movement and the trade union movement; about how science and technology was impacting society; about the public sector and implications of the impending privatization. I began to understand that the substance of development was to be sought not in the balance sheets of companies but in the living standard of the working people. That was when I realized that I was not cut out to be an academic. I needed to be with the people and be a part of their everyday struggles.

It was this conviction that led to my surrendering my American nationality after I finished my studies at IIT Kanpur, and I can proudly say I have a certificate of Indianness issued by the home ministry itself! I did not bother afterwards to apply for a passport. I still don't have one. I shall never forget the look of disbelief on the face of the consul of the American Embassy when I told him I was quite certain I wished to renounce my American citizenship. It took his staff a week to find the form I needed to fill.

What were the other things that put you on the path to Dalli Rajhara (in present-day Chhattisgarh) to work with Niyogi?

The Asian Games were held in Delhi in 1982 and the entire city was being dug up and constructed – flyovers, stadia, five-star hotels . . . Migrant workers were being brought from the poorer areas in the countryside and housed in huge camps. There was one enclosed in barbed wire close to the gate of JNU, where the Sidharth Hotel stands today. A group of students – some from JNU, some medical students from the All India Institute of Medical Sciences – wanted to support the struggles of workers. We reached out to the university staff, to the textile workers in the Delhi Cloth Mills and Birla Mill, to workers in the neighbouring Ballabgarh industrial belt and to the mostly Odiya migrant workers in the construction camp. The medical students ran medical camps and we tried to teach the children. We used to bring out a hand-printed wall newspaper, *Meri Teri Uski Baat*, named after a novel by the progressive Hindi writer Yashpal. One day, an Odiya worker we were interacting with at the camp, who had told us about the terrible conditions of bondage he, his sick wife and children were being subjected to, disappeared suddenly without a trace. This is when we began to understand the cruel power structure that underlies this misery. For me it was a revelation: no part-time charity would work. As the playwright and poet Bertolt Brecht famously said, one could not have 'a pass in his pocket' to leave these workers whenever one wished after exposing them to risk. Trade unionism demanded a life of commitment.

It was the workers of the textile mills who introduced us to Comrade Niyogi, around 1983–84. He had just then been arrested under the National Security Act and the workers were holding demonstrations for his release. We students joined the campaign. I remember going to JNU and to Delhi University professors and other prominent citizens to collect signatures on a petition for his release. When Niyogiji was finally released and he came to Delhi for a discussion with the Textiles Minister, he was curious to meet this young group of students and invited us to Dalli Rajhara, a mining township that supplied the Bhilai Steel Plant with iron ore. It was the headquarters of the Chhattisgarh Mines Shramik Sangh (CMSS), the union Niyogiji founded to fight for the rights of exploited iron ore miners.

And you went?

Yes. I shall never forget the first impact Dalli Rajhara had on me. It was 19 December 1983 – Shaheed Veer Narayan Divas, commemorating the Adivasi chieftain who had led a guerrilla struggle against the British in 1857 on the day he was supposed to have been publicly executed in Raipur town. By the time we reached Dalli Rajhara, a procession had started from the union office to encircle the town and return. It was so huge that people were still setting out when others had gone the whole way round. The impact of seeing so many barefoot peasants from the nearby villages, the miners smartly marching in their red-and-green uniform, helmets and boots, the baskets of steaming rice that were being dunked in and

taken out from the iron tubs filled with boiling water, lines of people sitting down to eat the simple rice and vegetable meal on leaves woven with twigs, was like being enveloped in a warm embrace of the working people.

The CMSS was a different kind of union, one that ran schools and a hospital, had got thousands of miners to quit alcohol, and which now, after many tough struggles, had made the iron ore miners of Dalli Rajhara the highest-paid contract miners in the country. Its red–green flag spelt out a worker–peasant solidarity, and indeed the organization was active in hundreds of forest villages around the mining town, where it was known as the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha (CMM). It fought corrupt forest officials and moneylenders and built ponds. My mind had been made up. I had come home.

And you jumped in?

My association with the CMM began in 1984 with comings and goings from Delhi, as I tried to convince my mother about this plunge that I was planning to take. I began with teaching children in Dalli Rajhara, but Niyogiji soon asked me to work in Bhilai, where a movement of contract workers was beginning to swell in the industrial area around the Bhilai Steel Plant, consisting mostly of its private ancillaries and auxiliaries. There were no labour laws to speak of there, nor any unions; wages were a pittance; work was long and hard and unsafe. The workers wanted working conditions comparable to those of the permanent workers of the Bhilai Steel Plant. This struggle for permanency and a 'living wage' in 1991 was in

fact swimming against the tide of liberalization, privatization and globalization. The movement of thousands of contract workers from scores of medium and small industrial units broke out like a river in high spate, and we became immersed to our necks in it.

What work did you do?

For nearly fourteen years or more in the CMM, I was a jack of all trades sort of karyakarta (activist), doing whatever was needed – a follower, someone in the background. During the peak of the Bhilai movement, each day would bring a new crisis. So, typing a press release, sweeping the office, maintaining a file of newspaper cuttings, translating documents, cooking food, liaising with lawyers, having meetings with women workers – there was always so much to be done, and always urgently. Sometimes there were periods of lull, as there always are in movements, and like any middle-class person one would then feel a little insecure – what am I doing? Are we achieving anything? But there was one lesson that I learnt over time. For the workers, there is little concept of individual identity. It is the union that gives them everything – their identity, their pride, their courage, their hope of a future. Yes, there are revolutionary times when civilizational changes happen in a matter of years, but generally, historical change is a very slow process. As intellectuals, our minds can leap centuries and continents in a moment, but that's not how real change works, and as Karl Marx famously said, 'The point, however, is to change it.' Slow or fast, for the workers there is no choice

but to fight. They taught me patience and perseverance and a lot about not thinking that one was the centre of the world.

How did your work in Bhilai turn out?

The Bhilai movement was crushed brutally. Four thousand two hundred workers were thrown out of the companies where they had dared to form unions and demand the barest minimum – an eight-hour workday, a living wage, payment slips and gate passes, Employees' State Insurance and Provident Fund coverage. There were attacks on leaders, and subsequently the assassination of Comrade Niyogi on 28 September 1991 within two weeks of his having petitioned the President and Prime Minister. Then the brutal police firing of 1 July 1992 on a Rail Roko Satyagraha that left seventeen workers dead. Hundreds of workers were in jail, dozens in hospital. Our offices were sealed and we finally 'broke' the curfew in the bastis by coming out on 15 August to unfurl the national flag. This period exists in my memory as a blur of rushing around courts and hospitals and jails. I was so easily recognizable in my salwar-kurta that I shifted to wearing a sari, which I continued to do till I was arrested and taken to Yerawada in 2018.

How did things change after Niyogi's death?

After his death there were internal splits and divisions in the organization in 1993 and 1995 – personally, they were

even more painful than the attacks by the capitalists and their police. I was now in a relationship, and my partner and I had shifted back to Dalli Rajhara. By this time I had rooted myself well among my working-class friends and their families, and it seemed only natural to start a family of one's own. However, in 1993 I suffered a terrible miscarriage during the eighth month of my pregnancy, and as Dr Saibal Jana of the Shaheed Hospital run by the CMM says, I would have gone 'the Smita Patil way' (referring to the actress who died in Mumbai from complications following childbirth) in any big city. I owe my second chance at life to the miners of Dalli Rajhara. Dozens of workers lined up to give me the blood I was rapidly losing. And then, in 1996, we adopted Maaysha, eight months old then, and brought her home; or rather, she came and made our house a home. Till she was about four, I was mostly a mother and a housewife in our little kaccha house and back garden with guava trees and a well. When she came, the union constructed a toilet for us – it was no longer possible to leave her to go to relieve oneself in the fields, remembering to take a stick along to shoo away the scavenging pigs! Thanks to Maaysha, we always had the neighbourhood children milling around at home, and my job would be to make parathas for them and dress her and her little friends up in 'saris' made of towels.

In these years I also passed my law exams, with the aid of kunjis (popular guidebooks), I admit, and in 2000, at the ripe old age of thirty-nine, I became a lawyer.

Why did you do this?

The main reason for doing a law degree was that by then I was one of the persons consistently dealing with legal matters on behalf of the CMM – first in the Niyogi murder case, then with the Bhilai Police Firing Enquiry Commission and then the cases in industrial courts, of workers of different companies in Bhilai who had been retrenched. Many wonderful lawyers appeared pro bono for us in the criminal and writ matters – Indira Jaising, Nandita Haksar, Vrinda Grover – and it's no accident that they were all women. In a historic sessions court judgment, two industrialists and their five henchmen were convicted for Niyogiji's murder. (Sadly, this was overturned in the higher courts, and eventually only one hired killer was convicted.)

When it came to labour matters, we had a tough job coping with the fees and tantrums of labour lawyers (with the honourable exception of Shri Sujoy Paul, who was an exemplary labour lawyer and is now a sitting judge of the Madhya Pradesh High Court), and looking at the battery of well-heeled corporate lawyers on the other side, what was the choice? As my comrades would say, 'Didi, anyway you do so much of the work of the lawyers yourself, why don't you just become one and save us some money?' In the year 2000, armed with my law degree and our four-year-old daughter, we moved back into Labour Camp, Jamul, in the Bhilai Industrial Estate, to a new phase of trade union life.

What has been the most satisfying part of your work as a lawyer?

The year 2007 was a watershed in many ways. The cases of the workers in the Bhilai movement had by now travelled to the high court at Bilaspur, so I began assisting a very experienced constitutional lawyer, Senior Advocate Kanak Tiwari, in representing those matters. That was when I realized that it was not only the workers who needed an empathetic lawyer; all people's movements had the same dire need. Those who needed legal help the most could afford it the least. The formal legal aid services were not only most inadequate, but they were also designed to help individuals, not groups. The laws that gave people rights – the Forest Rights Act, the labour laws, the laws protecting Dalits, Adivasis or women – were as a rule poorly implemented. On the other hand, the moment people would protest or agitate about this, the 'law and order' regime would kick in, and leaders and karyakartas would face exaggerated and fabricated criminal charges.

It was to provide legal support, both in 'offence' and 'defence' to groups – trade unions, village communities, NGOs – that I started the Janhit People's Legal Resource Centre. For the next decade, Janhit did maybe a hundred-odd cases: for villagers opposing acquisition of their lands for coal mining or power plants; for gram sabhas demanding implementation of forest rights; for communities facing environmental devastation; and for workers fighting for decent wages, safety and the right to form unions.

We met some remarkably brave clients. There was Janki Sidar, who fought Monnet Ispat Ltd against all odds for a decade to get back the land she had been fraudulently dispossessed of; Kanhai Patel and Karam Singh of Kosampali village, who battled a third round of land acquisition of their lands for the Jindal power plant and saved their village from being mined on all four sides, not to mention underground; Jangsay Poya, who faced a civil suit for lakhs of rupees foisted on him by South Eastern Coalfields Ltd for disrupting mining one day by taking a procession of villagers demanding to see the mandatory Gram Sabha Resolution granting permission for the mine; sixty-year-old Kashiram Yadav, who challenged the mighty Prakash Industries to pay up a decade of Provident Fund dues to hundreds of railway-siding loaders and almost succeeded; Bhagwati Sahu and Lakhan Sahu, who went to jail on false charges framed by a security officer of Ambuja Cement only because they organized the contract workers there to demand minimum wages . . .

In a decade we had filed cases not only against these companies but also against Balco (Vedanta), Bhilai Steel Plant, ACC, Tata, Essar, Vandana Power, Adani, National Mineral Development Corporation . . . I and our tiny team of lawyers had begun to make powerful enemies.

But 2007 was also the year the CMM faced its biggest split. Our faction was expelled and renamed itself 'CMM (Mazdoor Karyakarta Samiti)'. In dealing with this organizational turmoil, personal differences with my partner also came to a head and we decided to go our separate ways. On 14 May 2007, Dr Binayak Sen was arrested. He was a

medical doctor and a human rights activist, serving as general secretary of the Chhattisgarh unit of the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL). He was punished for having organized a team of human rights organizations from all over the country to investigate allegations of the emptying out of 644 villages and hundreds of killings in Bastar by a State-sponsored counter-insurgency campaign called Salwa Judum. The team had brought out a report called 'When the State Makes War on Its People'. (Much later, on 5 July 2011, the Supreme Court was to pass a landmark judgment in *Nandini Sundar & Ors vs State of Chhattisgarh & Ors*, outlawing and disbanding the Salwa Judum and vindicating the report.) When Dr Sen was arrested, I had been in the PUCL for some time but had not been at the forefront of its activities. As the chilling effect of Dr Sen's arrest hit civil society in Chhattisgarh, a handful of PUCL activists, including Dr Lakhan Singh, Shri Rajendra Sail, Ms Zulaikha Jabeen and I struggled to keep the human rights discourse alive. Gradually, PUCL not only revived but grew in strength and diversity, taking up issues of human trafficking, attacks on minorities, suppression of journalists, and fake encounters and sexual violence in counter-insurgency operations. As the general secretary of the Chhattisgarh PUCL for two terms after Dr Sen, I was bound to have earned the State's wrath.

You've said you never missed the English-speaking metropolitan world while living for decades in Chhattisgarh – apart from the urge to read the odd P.G. Wodehouse? Is

giving up the old life something you felt you had to do to be a genuine activist?

Once again, Brecht's lovely poem comes to mind. It goes something like,

Fighters are poor people. They cannot leave . . .
Before we go into battle I must know: have you a pass
In your coat pocket?

It is not so much about giving up the old life. I have found the working class quite accepting, even of activists who are culturally quite alien, if they trust their sincerity. It is about not leaving. It is about staying on even when the situation is grim. And you can stay only when you take root, when you feel comfortable, when you make friends. Coming from a middle-class, intellectual background, from a nuclear family with a single atheist feminist mother and a British childhood to boot, it was initially a big chasm to bridge, socially and culturally. But the time came when I really began to feel at home sitting in my doorway in the labour camp, chatting with my neighbours as we cleaned some bhaaji and our children dozed in our laps. I always enjoyed the night-long Chhattisgarhi naacha (folk theatre) programmes in the villages, where everyone sat on gunnysacks wrapped up in shawls and laughed at the sly political banter of the jester and waited for the sun to rise. And I began to confide my most personal troubles to my working-class comrades. Yes, of course, I would still miss playing Scrabble with my mother or

reading a P.G. Wodehouse, and there's nothing wrong with that – it just meant one learnt to straddle both worlds.

You've said you consider yourself a leftist and a Marxist, and that you are very sceptical about capitalism. Why?

The first reason is that I have seen the underbelly of that capitalism from very close quarters – the condition of the migrant construction workers who toiled to make the stadia for the Asian Games; the contract workers who died in accidents in the Bhilai Steel Plant or Ambuja Cement for completely avoidable reasons; the houses and fields of Chhurikala village in Korba caked in the fly ash of surrounding thermal power plants; or the poverty of the Adivasis displaced by the Bailadila mines where the rivers run red with iron ore; and the callousness the companies and the State displayed when it came to legitimate demands for better wages, safe working conditions, mitigation of environmental degradation or adequate compensation and rehabilitation for land acquisition. Second, the obscenely growing gap between the rich and the poor. We are told that growth is going to 'trickle down' one day, but I see it 'gushing up' into Mauritian tax havens. The 2023 Oxfam Report, aptly titled 'Survival of the Richest', has found that just 5 per cent of Indians own more than 60 per cent of the country's wealth, while the bottom 50 per cent of the population has only 3 per cent of it.

A system that uses the labour of multitudes and generates enormous wealth but does not distribute it. A system that possesses cutting-edge medical knowledge and still allows

people to die from malnutrition, TB, gastroenteritis and malaria. A system that is scientifically and technologically highly advanced and yet insists on degrading the environment of this planet so much as to make it unlivable. A system that breeds war, colonial occupation and fascism. That is what modern-day capitalism is.

No doubt the socialist experiments of the Soviet Union and China, after the initial spectacular leaps ahead in living conditions, ended in the stranglehold of single-party-led State capitalism too. But surely that is no reason not to keep trying to achieve socialism, because the world in its present condition is not one human beings deserve.

Can you be called a dissident?

If that means do I dare speak against corporates, against governments, against powerful people when they are tyrannical? . . . Yes. But I also believe that I am a deeply Constitution-abiding person. I have striven for and will continue to strive for justice, liberty, equality and fraternity for every citizen around me. Is that dissidence?

After three decades in Chhattisgarh, you moved to Delhi, became a visiting professor at the National Law University (NLU). This was a big move. Why did you do it?

Around June 2017, I began to feel strongly that Maaysha had entered a critical phase in her life and education. She needed my time and attention. I also needed to be able to