



Sushila in 1949

# She Fought For Freedom

## An Interview With Sushila Chain

*These are extracts, translated from Punjabi, from a taperecorded interview conducted with Sushila Chain in 1983. Sushilaji was born in 1923. She was one of a handful of women who worked on the kisan front of the communist movement in the early 1940s, in Punjab. There were a few women in the student movement in the towns such as Lahore, but very few who worked, as Sushilaji did, among peasants. Sushilaji and her husband, also a communist activist, now live in the house of their only daughter, at Jalandhar. Sushilaji continues to be active in the women's front of the Communist Party of India. She is involved in helping women who have marital problems or who are deserted by their husbands. She is one of those women whose fight for national independence and for social justice also entailed a courageous struggle for personal freedom to define her own life and work.*

MY father was a Congress leader and was also secretary of the Arya Samaj in Pathankot. Therefore he was always engaged in social reform work. He often told my mother that he wanted to make me a "leader."

He wanted to send me to a boarding school but my mother objected on the ground that there would be untouchables in the school. My father used to tell her that she could "purify" me by sprinkling Ganga water on me when I came home at weekends.

My father was a contractor, but because he was in the socialist wing of the Congress, he used to pay his workers 12 annas a day whereas the prevailing rate was 8 annas a day.

My father had a friend, also a contractor, who suffered losses in his business in Kutch. He asked my father to help him and proposed that they should jointly take a contract for building a railway line. My father agreed, and they started work together. But the friend turned out to be a crook and he killed my father by giving him poison. This was in 1934-35.

### In Search Of Justice

My father's death was a terrible shock for me. As a reaction to this, I became deeply religious and started to do *bhakti*. After everyone in the house went to sleep, I would sit down to do *bhakti*. During the day too, I would keep saying "Ram, Ram" and chanting

the *gayatri mantra*. However, all this was of no avail.

Then, by chance, I read a detective novel in which there was an account of people who used bombs. The idea came to me that there were people in our country too who knew how to use bombs. Bhagat Singh had thrown a bomb. I then began to search for a party which could provide me with knowledge of bombs and pistols. My objective was to take revenge for my father's death. My idea was that such evil people who harm others should be punished.

Then I began to pressure my elder brother to let me continue my education. My sister lived in Amritsar and she took me there. I used to read in the library there. When my brother-in-law was transferred to Lahore, I went to Lahore with them. At that time, I was preparing for the *Prabhakar* examination. This was around the year 1938.

In Lahore I attended a private school at Sant Nagar. My teacher was Dev Dutt Atal. At that time, warrants for his arrest had been issued. We were not aware of this.

One day, he asked us to write an

essay on unemployment and gave us a lecture on this topic. He placed a book *Gandhism And Socialism* by Acharya Kirpalani on his desk, and said that if anyone wanted extra information, they could consult that book. I took the book and finished it the same night. It changed my way of thinking. Earlier, my idea was to finish off one capitalist, but I now realised that this would not help. The entire social system would have to be changed.

After I finished the examination, Dev Dutt Atal asked me what my plans for the future were. I told him that I could no longer stay in Lahore as my sister and brother-in-law had moved elsewhere, so I would be returning to Pathankot. By this time, I had understood, from his lectures and his conversation, that he had connections with some political party. So I asked him whether I could get in touch with his party people in Pathankot. He gave me the address of Shakuntala Sharda. When I returned to Pathankot, I contacted her. This was in the year 1940.

### Struggle In The Home

At that time, the Kirti Communist Party was the more active communist

group in Punjab. Vishnu Dutt Sharma was in charge of the party at Pathankot. All the party work was underground, and was very dangerous. It was decided that I would receive party literature surreptitiously through our sweeper woman, Isro. Since I had to give Isro something in return for her service in getting me the literature, I started to teach in a school for a salary of Rs 30.

By then, my elder brother had set up his own company as a rival to the one that had been taken over by my father's false friend. My brother was a Congressman, yet he was a capitalist and I was a revolutionary. One day, he discovered a copy of *Lal Jhanda* and asked me where I had got it. I gave an evasive answer. He tried very hard to find out from me the source of this literature, but I would not reveal the source.

One day, antiwar posters appeared all over the town, and there was one in front of our house too. The second world war was then considered an imperialist war by the communists. My brother accused me of having put up these posters. I said I had not put them up. After that, my struggle started within my home as well.

My brother urged me to work in the Congress and not with the communists because the latter were considered dangerous. I said that I would work only for the communists. Our arguments continued. Finally, I decided to go on a hunger strike. My understanding was that if Gandhi could convince people by going on a fast, then my own kith and kin were bound to be affected by my suffering. I did not really know how to go about it. I gave up drinking water as well. The struggle continued. I went on fast about three or four times.

My brother then discovered the letters that Vishnu Dutt Sharma used to write to me and send along with the literature. My brother began to suspect that perhaps I had some other 'kind of relationship with Vishnu Dutt Sharma. So my family began to pester me to tell them the name of the person whom I

wanted to marry. They assured me that they would not object on grounds of caste, and that they would arrange to get me married to the man of my choice. I denied any desire to get married, and insisted that I did not want to marry anybody.

Then my brother began to discuss with his wife the possibility of quietly finding a suitable boy for me and arranging my marriage without my knowledge. I came to know of this plan, so I talked to my brother and warned him that if he made any such arrangement, I would publicly tell the bridegroom that he was my brother and I was his sister, and I would thus bring



**Sushila with tier husband, Chain Singh Chain, in 1943. Standing behind is her nephew.**

dishonour to the whole family in full view of the assembled *barat* which would have to return empty-handed. I was about 14 or 15 years old at this time.

### **Political Development**

In the meanwhile, my younger brother had contracted TB and was staying at Batala with my mother for treatment. This brother was extremely intelligent but when he was studying in the third year at medical college, my father withdrew him, saying there was

no need for him to be a salaried employee since we had our own business. He started helping my father in the construction of the railway line. But the loss of his medical career followed by my father's death affected him very deeply, and he took to drink. Excessive drinking finally led to TB.

My brother died in Batala and we all went for the funeral. From there, my elder brother sent me away with my sister. His intention was to make me break with my political connections in Pathankot. I was sent to Lyallpur where my sister's husband was a deputy collector. There, I started giving tuitions and also started teaching in a private school where girls studied for *Bhushan* and *Prabhakar* degrees. I used to borrow books from the library.

In my class, there was a girl called Shakuntala Azad, who now lives in Delhi. Her brother was a revolutionary. I started visiting their house, and my political views became known to them. Thus, my political contacts were revived. He belonged to the Socialist Party. I again began to get reading material which helped develop my political views.

When my sister found out that I had revived my political contacts, she got worried. She tried to use the services of a *sanyasi*, who was our family *guru*, to wean me away from politics. This *guru* tried all kinds of methods, including hypnotism, in order to influence me. But his efforts failed.

Two months later, I returned to Pathankot as my sister-in-law was expecting a child and she needed help. Her elder daughter was ill and the same *sanyasi* had given her a *taviz* to wear. One day, my brother and I decided to remove the *mantra* that had been placed inside it. My brother, too, did not believe in these superstitions because, after all, he too was a political worker, though he was in the Congress. This greatly annoyed my sister-in-law who again called in the *sanyasi* to get another *taviz* made. This proved the occasion for another battle of wits between the *sanyasi* and me.

Ultimately I succeeded in exposing him and destroying his influence over our family.

### **Bid For Freedom**

I was about 18 years old. I returned to my sister in Lyallpur, and to my school teaching there. After some time, my sister and her family went away to Kashmir for the holidays, and I began to stay with some relatives in Lyallpur. My own vacation was to begin 10 days later, and I was then supposed to go to Pathankot.

On July 1, 1941, I attained the age of 18. I told the headmaster of the school where I taught that my mother was seriously ill so I had to leave town. I went to Lahore and started looking for Dev Dutt Atal, my old teacher, who had initiated me into politics, I could not find him, but I met Sanyukta, my classmate, who told me that Atalji was in jail. She put me in touch with Shakuntala Sharda, my earlier political contact.

Shakuntala informed the party that I had left home and had come to work for the party. The party leaders then deputed Chain Singh Chain, the secretary of the politburo, to talk to me. The leaders were worried lest having been brought up in a wealthy, urban family, I should not be able to face up to the rigours of life in rural areas, where the party's political work was concentrated.

Chainji lectured me for two hours on how difficult it was for a woman to face the political hardships involved in the life of a revolutionary. He related stories of the tortures inflicted on women revolutionaries in Russia and pointed out that similar treatment was meted out to women in Indian prisons.

I listened quietly to what he had to say, and when he had finished, I asked him if that was all he had to say. I then asked him whether the Communist Party made any distinction between men and women, and whether they did not allot political work to women. I told him that I had already read about all that he had told me in his lecture, and that the party should allot me the work I was to do. He was put in a quandary



**A group of women who courted arrest. After meetings were held over 18 days in 68 villages, 104 women came forward to court arrest.**

and consulted the other political leaders as to what should be done with this 18 year old girl who had never been to the villages.

They decided to send me to the home of one comrade, Mohabbat Singh, who was then in jail. They hoped that the women of his family might be able to persuade me to abandon my plans. I stayed there for a month.

### **Declaration Of Independence**

Then I received a letter from the party, telling me that I was not yet an adult since an unmarried girl became an adult only at the age of 21. Therefore, I could become independent only after three years. They suggested that I should either return home for three years or get married, because if I got married I would be considered independent.

I wrote back a long letter in which I said that the advice to get married which they were offering me was the same advice that my family had given, which I had rejected. Further, I told them that they should either allot me political work or should tell me frankly that they did not want me in the party, in which case I would join a factory as a worker and would organise the women on my own.

The party then relented and called me to Lahore to attend a study circle for a week. We were taught the basics

of Marxism, dialectical materialism, the various stages of human history, that is, primitive communism, slavery, feudalism, capitalism and socialism. The party leaders were very pleased with my success in this course, and they felt I would do equally well in political activism. I was sent to Ferozepur in 1941, and I stayed there for a month.

### **Shedding Fear**

When I reached Ferozepur, preparations were in full swing for a *kisan* conference. The district party decided that I should work with Bebe Dhan Kaur, sister of Chanan Singh. My first public speech was at village Bhuttar Kalan where, on being asked to take the mike, I spoke nonstop for half an hour.

At that time, warrants of arrest were out for all the known political workers so our meetings could not be announced in advance. We would normally hold up to three political meetings in a day, in different villages, travelling on foot from one village to another. We would also hold separate meetings for women in the local *gurudwaras*. Thus I became accustomed to delivering on an average three speeches a day.

In Ferozepur district, the position of women was very bad. They were not allowed to sit on chairs or

*charpais*. They were not given vegetables to eat, so they ate their *rotis* with onions, salt and pickles. In such a situation, it was impossible to persuade any local woman to occupy a chair at the meeting. Therefore, the normal pattern of our meetings was that Bebe Dhan Kaur, who was my escort, being an older woman, would chair the meeting and I would be the speaker.

Once, we were holding a meeting at Fatehgarh Kot, the place where the big *kisan* conference was due to be held. We had organised a women's meeting in a *haveli*.

Bebe Dhan Kaur was in the chair and I was speaking when a *thanedar* and two constables appeared at the door. In this area, at that time, people were in great fear of the police. So when the police appeared at the door, the women all stood up and Bebe Dhan Kaur got up from her chair. I made her sit down again, and asked the policemen what they wanted. The police asked me to come out but I told them to say whatever they had to say right there. I wanted the assembled women to witness whatever was to transpire, so that their political consciousness would be raised.

The *thanedar* proceeded to question me about my place of origin, my parents and so on. I refused to divulge any of this information. I also challenged them to arrest me. While the altercation was going on, a lot of men and children collected outside the *haveli*. The police then called Bebe Dhan Kaur outside and questioned her about my identity. She, too, refused to comply, and in fact, proceeded to humiliate the *thanedar*, whom she knew from childhood, by relating how she had once given him a sound beating when he had come to steal sugarcane from her field. The *thanedar* then had to leave in the presence of all the villagers.

This story spread to all the villages in the district. Women related it to other women when they met at marriages, funeral ceremonies and other social occasions. The people came to believe that the police were powerless even to

arrest a woman. I had deliberately challenged the *thanedar* to arrest me in front of all the women because I wanted them to shed their fear of the police. Of course, I knew that he could not arrest me without a warrant.

The outcome of this episode was that hordes of people began pouring into the village for the conference. Earlier, they had been petrified by the possibility of police firing at the conference. Now they came from as far off as Moga, and the women of Fatehgarh Kot organised a *langar* (communal food arrangement) for three days continuously during the conference. As the procession came

of Ferozepur district, doing political work.

At these women's meetings, we emphasised the damage done to India by British rule. We pointed out that if Britain stopped draining away wealth from India, ours would become a rich country. We also explained how modern science and technology could help India become prosperous, and could reduce the daily drudgery of women, once British rule ended.

I used to point out how from birth onwards, a girl is treated by her family, including her mother, as a burden. Her birth is seen as a calamity and derogatory names such as *patthar*,



**Sushilaji explaining the memorandum of demands at a sit-in strike of 200 women organised by the All India Women's Conference outside the district commissioner's office in 1980.**

from Moga for the conference, seven presidents were arrested in succession. Finally, the conference was chaired by Gair Singh Chhajar, by which time the authorities decided not to make any more arrests. The conference was a huge success.

### **Work With Women**

This conference marked the beginning of my political life. A third woman, Usha, who was Shakuntala Sharda's sister-in-law, joined us. Bebe Dhan Kaur would chair meetings, I would speak and Usha would sing. For eight months, we toured the villages

*randi*, are used for her, even by her mother.

At a meeting in Sheikhpura, I narrated the whole story of slavery that is a woman's life from birth to death. Her birth is seen as a misfortune for the family. She is not considered worthy of being educated, because she is just a *dher da kuda*, a heap of garbage, which has to be jumped over. She must be married off because she cannot produce food and someone else must feed her. As the saying goes *Gau us kille banna jithe char a mile*, that is, the cow must be tied where

there is fodder. After marriage, she becomes subservient to her husband, and in old age, she is dependent on her son. Her whole life is one of subordination and slavery to men.

When I returned to this village after a while, I found that a blind girl had converted my speech into verse and had composed a song recounting the story of a woman's life. This song became very popular in the villages.

In our speeches, we would link up the backwardness of women with the enslavement of the country. I explained that women's backwardness could not be removed till poverty was removed, and poverty could not be removed till foreign rule was eradicated and till peasants' and workers' rule was established. In this way we linked the women's question with national independence and socialism.

### **Women Unite**

Women would ask us how we, unarmed, could fight the British who had armies and armaments. We would reply that our strength lay in *jathebandi*, our organisation, our unity. If united, 40 crore Indians could easily throw out six crore Britishers from India. We told them that people in all walks of life, factory workers, office workers, and peasants, were organising. When all of them united and refused to cooperate with the British, the latter would have no choice but to leave.

There was tremendous enthusiasm among the people. Women used to turn up in large numbers for meetings. Many came out of curiosity to see a woman speaking from a platform. In this area, women were not permitted to sit on a chair. Sitting on a chair became a revolutionary act in that situation.

We felt the need to train women cadres. I held a training school for girls and gave lectures on political topics. This was underground activity and no one in the village knew that such a school existed. Most of the students were the daughters and sisters of male comrades.

Reports of our political activity in the villages were regularly sent to the

Kirti Party leaders who were then in jail. Teja Singh Swatantar, the major leader, was told that the party now had a sizeable cadre of women, and he was asked to give guidelines for their activity.

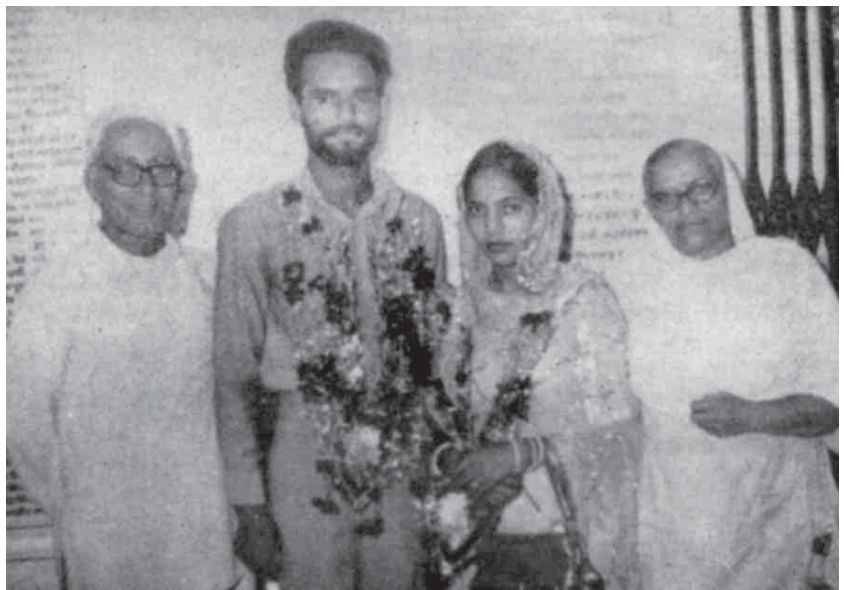
He formulated guidelines on the basis of which we organised the Punjab Progressive Women's Congress. We held a meeting in Lahore in 1942, which was attended by Sita Devi, wife of principal Chhabildas. Bibi Raghbir Kaur was president of the Congress and I was secretary. At this time, many communists had been released from prison because of the party's people's war line.

I then went to work in Kangra

food insubstantial, and on one occasion, we all got badly infected with lice. In rural areas, it was not considered proper for women to wear clean, washed clothes. We had to face a lot of criticism on this score. I also had to get used to wearing the hard village shoes which caused bad sores on my feet.

### **Forced To Marry**

After I completed my work in Ferozepur, I was called to Lahore by party leaders for discussion of an important problem. This problem had emerged while I had been doing political work in Ferozepur — the fact of my being a single, unmarried girl. Everywhere, people used to ask about



**One of the intercaste dowryless marriages arranged by the Punjab Stri Sabha, in 1982.**

district where I had many interesting experiences. Comrade Parasram and others had recently joined the Kirti Party, and had brought the entire executive of the Congress along with them. They were then undertaking a propaganda tour of the district in order to mobilise the rank and file behind the Kirti Party. I worked with them for about six months. We were a group of about 15 people. We used to travel on foot all day, holding meetings wherever we came across a cluster of houses or a village.

The work was extremely hard, the

my marital status, and there were suspicions that my moral character was not sound. Our comrades would explain that I was simply an independent, liberated woman, but the doubts lingered.

When I went to Lahore and met the party leaders, they raised the question in the following way. They said that I was doing very good political work but without a commensurate impact. The reason was apparently my unmarried status. They asked me what my views were on the question of marriage. I replied that if they wished, they could

get me married, but the marriage would be purely a formal one, a marriage of duty, not a real marriage. The party would be solely responsible for the marriage. If the man to whom I was married tried to establish marital relations, I would not accept it. Therefore, they should arrange my marriage to someone who held similar views on the question.

I was asked whether I had any caste or other preferences, to which I replied that as far as I was concerned, I could be married to a tree, since all I needed was a marriage certificate. In this way, I married Chain Singh Chain. When I got married, I did not even know what his name was. We were married in a *gurudwara* in a village in Gurdaspur district. A woman recited the marriage vows.

Another couple was also married along with us. The girl was relatively new to politics and had not done any political work. After the marriage, we went to a public meeting at which she was due to make her first public speech, which I had, on the party's instructions, written for her. However, someone had informed her family of her whereabouts, and as soon as she finished her speech, her family members came, bundled her into a car and took her away.

In the meantime, I went off to Kangra with Usha. While we were campaigning there, we received the news that the party hideout had been raided and most of the leaders, including Chain Singh Chain, had been arrested. I was asked to read out this information at a public meeting, which I did. A couple of days later, comrade Parasram asked me why I had not expressed a desire to go and see Chain in jail. I asked him why I was supposed to do that. He replied : "Because you are married to him." That is how I came to know that Chain was the man I had married. I did not know him at all, except for the lecture he had given me when I had first wanted to join the party.



**Sushilaji, in 1971, with three comrades, in Soviet Russia, where she had gone for medical treatment.**

### **Changing Perceptions**

In Kangra, the position of women was very backward. When our group reached a village and had to be fed, men would prepare and serve the food. Women were not allowed to do this work.

In our speeches, we would say that it was wrong that women, who had given birth to famous kings and *gurus*, should be kept in subjection. We had to considerably moderate our views on the question of women, in order to make them acceptable to people. We could not go too far all at once.

The presence of women among the political activists succeeded in bringing women to these political gatherings. The very fact that people saw women participating in public activities and making speeches, helped to change their perceptions about the role and abilities of women. Our political propaganda in Kangra had considerable effect.

We used to talk about the degradation of women in traditional societies in Russia, China and India. We would tell how little girls in China had their feet bound, how in Russia a

bride was given a stick in her dowry which her husband was supposed to use on her as soon as possible. Then we would also cite tradition to exhort women to be fearless and independent, as had been many women in our history and mythology. In Kangra, we would give examples from Hindu myth and in Punjab, we would quote Sikh traditions. We used also to say that India was unique in that men like Rammohan Roy, Dayanand and Gandhi had taken up the question of female emancipation. We always tried to link up the contribution of individuals to societal developments. This was because we understood that it was the whole system that had to be changed.

During the war, the Kirti Party merged with the Communist Party of India (CPI). The CPI had no separate organisation for women nor did they want to retain the organisation which existed because its name would remind people of its affiliation with the Kirti Party, so the name was changed to Women's Self Defence League. After some time the party decided that we should work within the All India Women's Conference. This body used

to concentrate more on reformist work and not on political work among women. So our focus shifted to organising schools for girls in villages and, after partition, to helping in the rehabilitation of women. I did a lot of work in the educational field in Jullundur district. I started many schools there. We used to take 8 annas fees from each student, and when there were 30 students, we would engage a teacher for Rs 15. When the schools were established, we would turn them over to the district boards who would run them. In this way, many schools were started in villages which earlier had no provision for female education.

### Personal Life

Now I come to a development in my personal life. The fact that I and comrade Chain did not live together had begun to cause many problems. The fact that ours was to be only a marriage of duty was not known even to other party workers. Therefore, people would often express their

surprise at our not living together. Some comrades would even question me directly.

Some comrades, thinking that my husband and I did not get along together, tried to establish a relationship with me. I would not report them to the party, but being rebuffed, they would spread stories and carry tales.

As a result of all this, when comrade Chain came out of prison, the party leaders suggested that we be allotted work in the same town for a period of two months so that we could get to know each other and could decide whether we wanted to live together or not. We were both posted to Lahore and subsequently, we informed the leaders that we were willing to be partners for life.

I was worried, however, that if I became a mother, my political work would be adversely affected. Since we had little knowledge of contraception, I soon gave birth to a daughter. We could not give her proper care and she

fell ill and died. I gave birth to another daughter who also fell ill and died. People began to comment on the fact that two of my daughters had died. I also began to feel that on the one hand, I believed in the emancipation of women but on the other hand, I had failed to look after my daughters.

After this, I had another daughter and I resolved to bring her up well. When she was three and a half years old, I received orders from the party to resume full time political work. My daughter then grew up in the homes of various workers of the party. Up to the age of seven, she was unable to get any education.

When she was seven, I fell ill with anaemia, and had to give up my political work for some time. Then I brought her to stay with me and in two or three months, I taught her Hindi, Punjabi and mathematics up to the third standard level. Then I admitted her in a hostel. After that, she stayed away from me again. □

## Tea Pluckers In Assam

Ramchandi tea estate is situated in Cachar district of Assam. About 130 permanent labourers work on this estate. Contract labourers are employed as and when necessary. Male labourers get a daily wage of Rs 8.30 while female labourers get only Rs 8.20. Both male and female labourers have to fulfil a quota of 15 kilos of plucked leaves per day. The female workers get 10 paise less than male labourers though the amount of work they do is exactly the same. This is clear cut discrimination against women workers. It may be mentioned here that the government enacted the Equal Re-muneration Act in 1976. According to this Act, men and women should be paid equal wages for equal work.

The government of Assam has fixed a minimum wage of Rs 9.60 a day. Thus the workers on this tea estate are paid Rs 1.40 less than the legal minimum wage to which they are entitled. The Factory Act, 1948, lays down that workers must be given one paid holiday a week. But the

workers on this estate are not paid on the holiday that they get.

The women of the village are ill treated from time to time. Sagari is a middle aged woman who lives in the village near the tea estate. There are eight members in her family. Her husband is



an invalid and cannot work for a living, but her two sons and daughter-in-law are capable of earning.

Almost all the villagers work on the tea estate. No other source of livelihood

is available to them. Most of them are not educated. Now there is a school so a few children are able to study there.

Sagari was a worker in the tea garden and she pointed out the illegal activities of the management. The management began to victimise her. A plot was laid. The management asked the villagers to sign on a blank paper, telling them that a list was being prepared for distribution of free clothing before Durga Puja. After collecting signatures, allegations against Sagari were written on the paper. It appeared as if the villagers had sent these allegations. On the pretext of this supposed "complaint by the villagers, Sagari was dismissed from employment and none of her family members was allowed to work on the estate.

The management with the help of some influential people in the village have persuaded the villagers to boycott Sagari and her family. Drinking is rampant in the village. The supply of free liquor helps the management to suppress the grievances of the people. Sagari and her family are now facing starvation.

—Basanti