

A
PATHMAKER
Tributes to Vina Mazumdar

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Becoming Sisters

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This paper attempts to tell the story of an evolving relationship, an emotionally and intellectually powerful as well as rewarding one. It refers to two levels of the relationship, the personal and the professional—the influence of the person, Vina Mazumdar, and her work on me, as a person and on my work and perhaps, to some extent, it refers to the reverse as well. It also relates to the complex, changing and often ambiguous relationship between the women's movement in India and child care issues. The title tries to reflect the perception that sisterhood is an act of becoming, as much as a state of being.

A Contextual Beginning

I first met Vinadi in the late 1960s perhaps 1967 or 1968, in the context of child care. As a school teacher, I was responsible, however partially, for the care of her two elder daughters—a pair of lively, intelligent, charming, boisterous, rebellious and independent creatures, which in school terminology, translates as 'difficult'. One day, I was called in to the Principal's office to meet with the parent of these 'difficult' girls, and went in fully expecting to meet a 'difficult' parent—what I got was Vinadi in full spate, explaining her situation and that of her daughters to the bemused Principal. I sat round-eyed, equally bemused—I had never met anyone like her before. Dressed in a simple white cot-

ton Bangla sari, but with cigarette ash spilled all over it, vivaciously gesticulating but not talking about trivia, offering sharp and clear analysis of what help she and her daughters needed but with an intensity that pointed to depths within, humorous but obviously expecting to be taken seriously. Here was an amazing study in contrasts, someone whom *Readers' Digest* could easily categorise as 'unforgettable', and that impression has remained with me.

That was the beginning of many more encounters, during which I came to know her better. She was going through a difficult period in her life and I watched with growing admiration the way this courageous woman dealt, and how lightly, with her troubles. She seemed to me a wonderful, totally unconventional mother, a view which her teenage daughters probably would not have accepted at the time. I believe that on her part she developed some trust and confidence in me, as I saw the girls in and out of many a scrape, but that is another tale. And so the relationship grew, a good warm parent-teacher one. And so it might have stayed, and so it might have ended, as our lives would have drifted apart after the girls left school. But other unexpected events were to bring us together in very different ways.

A Watershed

At around this time, I was appointed, for reasons which I have never been able to fathom, a member of the first Committee on the Status of Women in India. This I discovered to be a motley collection of wily women politicians and high-society ladies with little inclination or ability to undertake the job for which they were appointed. After a series of tea parties, polite small talk and not an inch of progress, I was so frustrated, desperate, dejected and furious, and at the same time aware of my own powerlessness in the situation, that I decided, as a protest, to withdraw. In late 1971, I resigned from the Committee. A year later, the Government of India came to the same conclusion, and disbanded the committee, appointing a fresh team, with who else

but Vina Mazumdar as the Member-Secretary. And lo and behold, within a year and a half, under the energetic and brilliant leadership of Vinadi and the benign and wise guidance of J.P. Naik, the group produced that historic document which was to bring about a sea change in our perceptions about our society, and a 180° degree turn in our lives—the *Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India*. I sometimes wonder if I made a mistake in resigning from the Committee when I did—if I had stayed on, would I have had the privilege of working with Vinadi and the team on that watershed document, or would I merely have been thrown out with the rest of the garbage? I suspect the latter.

The Personal is the Professional

Vinadi's unbounded generosity of spirit, her ability to love even, or especially, those she disagreed with, and her utter lack of the slightest bit of meanness, are finely illustrated by two incidents connected with this report. The first and more painful episode is about the way in which Vinadi, who as the chief author of the Report, should have been the natural choice to represent the country at the first UN Conference on Women held in Mexico in 1975, was cheated out of that opportunity by scheming manipulators who then, as now, surrounded the seat of power and sashayed blithely into the official delegation. While I, and other friends, boiled with rage and resentment, and were quite vocal about it, Vinadi has never made a comment about it, bears no grudges, and to my disgust, to this day welcomes the traitors with the same warm hug which I get! Astutely, and at gut level, she understood that building allies was more important than promoting divisions, at both the personal and professional levels. The women's movement has benefited ever since by her wisdom in valuing compassion more highly than justice, and understanding that strength comes from inclusiveness.

The second concerns the lengthy review of the report which I wrote for the journal *Social Change*. My detailed analysis was very appreciative on the whole, but I was scathing in my critique

of how the report viewed and handled the gamut of issues of children, working women and child care. I may mention that by this time I had left school-teaching far behind and was working in Mobile Crèches, deeply concerned about the rights of women labour, child care and the widespread 'invisibility' of women's multiple burdens which underlay the pervasive indifference to the issue. Vinadi said nothing when she saw the review, but with an impish twinkle in her eye, dryly pointed out that the Chairperson of the Committee was none other than the former President of the Indian Council for Child Welfare who would perhaps be considered by most people as an authority on child welfare and a made-to-order spokesperson for the child. I was suddenly appalled by my naiveté, but Vinadi thought it a huge joke, which she enjoys to this day.

The Second Level

But I did not retract, and Vinadi accepted that I had laid my finger on the nerve, though perhaps I had not expressed it very kindly. The point was that this stance reflected an attitude which has been internalised by most sections of the women's movement, one that deliberately underplayed and delegitimised one of women's three primary roles—the role of child caregiver. And this was the outcome of a fear that women would be forever constrained forcibly and boxed within the traditional image which recognises only one role, the domestic one, and glorifies the 'mother', so beloved of pop revivalist culture and Indian cinema. The swing of the pendulum away from this traditional limiting image led the women's movement to violently negate it and to throw out the 'baby' with the bathwater! It is only very recently that the balance is slowly righting itself, and this is due in no small measure to Vinadi's consistent and continual efforts over the years to recognise other voices, provide space to all, speak up for the marginalised and the dissenters, and work towards integration at a higher level. Thus then did Vinadi, who took me seriously as the voice of the child, become a champion for its re-

entry into the concerns of the women's movement, a process which is proceeding unevenly even now.

A New Initiative

The next major step in working towards the goals which grew out of The Report that transformed our lives, was the setting up of the Centre for Women's Development Studies. This, at another level was an attempt to build bridges, this time by pioneering efforts to integrate academic pursuits with social activism. Invited to be a founding member of the Centre, I was proud to be one of the seven signatories to the Memorandum of Association, which I also had a hand in drawing up, having acquired some skills in such matters from our common guru, the late J.P. Naik. The Centre was formally launched in 1980 with Vinadi as its ever ebullient Director, and I have been closely associated with it ever since, though geographical distance now limits the role I can play in its affairs.

The Centre soon emerged as an institutional model for the new and growing band of activist academics, especially in women's studies. At another level, the debate between the two streams, activist and academic, raged within the Indian Association of Women's Studies, yet another initiative launched by Vinadi. The creative tension generated by this debate has proved to be one of the best stimulants for the range and quality of work developed within these institutions and their engagement with the social movements of the last two decades.

Building Bridges

The nature, range and diversity of activities initiated at the Centre in the first decade were enormous. Vinadi, ever bubbling with energy and dreaming up new schemes and visions every minute, had one more of her wonderful ideas in one more of our meetings, which were prolonged debates over coffee and cigarettes, mostly conducted in a mixture of Bengali and English. Why not,

she said, bring out a series of updated tenth year status reports on different aspects of the status of women in India, to be placed before the Second International Women's Conference at Nairobi in 1985? (Of course by now, it was accepted by all that Vinadi as the undisputed leader would be heading the Indian team going to that Conference). She looked around challengingly, blowing rings of smoke. I rose to the bait and immediately piped up that I would work on a paper on the status of child care for poor women in the country. Vinadi might not have known it, (or perhaps she did and deliberately came to my rescue) but this project was a lifeline to me when I was at a particularly low ebb in my career. I jumped at the chance and worked hard on the book, enlarging my own knowledge of the subject, and emerging from this unique learning experience with greater confidence in my own understanding of the issues. The book, *Who Cares?* was duly published by CWDS in 1985, in time for the Nairobi Conference. I also learned with amusement that though six manuscripts had been planned on various sub-themes, mine was the only one to have been delivered in time for the publication deadline. Not a bad achievement for a subject which was still marginal to the concerns of the women's movement, and I congratulated myself for having moved the item up one notch on that agenda.

Surging Forward

Vinadi's commitment to the issue of child care and her leadership in that area did not stop there. In the late 1980s, she commissioned a series of studies on the status of child care services in different parts of the country, leading to the publication of the report *Whither Child Care?* in 1989. In 1988, another important milestone in the history of the women's movement was the publication of *Shram Shakti*, the Report on Self Employed Women and the Women in the Informal Sector. Typically, Vinadi, though she had refused to be a member of the Committee on grounds of principle, gave it unflagging support, as well as time, resources and energy through informal channels. It was a marvellous lesson in

cooperation without compromise, illustrating yet again her inclusiveness and generosity, which stood out even more obviously in contrast to the antics of some who distanced themselves from the process in a negative and destructive manner.

The outcome of these endeavours in the 1980s was the birth in 1989 of the Forum for Crèche and Child Care Services, (FORCES), a coalition of groups and institutions formed to act as a pressure group for child care. Launched as an outcome of *Shram Shakti* at the instance of Elaben Bhatt and with her blessings, CWDS was a founder member, as well as Co-Convener for several years, and continues to be an influential core member of this body. Though Vinadi's personal involvement with FORCES has declined in recent years, she drafted, with her well-known skills, many of the early policy documents which laid the foundation for FORCES work. The fact that leading women's organisations, trade unions and women's studies groups have been vital and vocal forces behind FORCES is to me proof that the wheel has indeed come full circle, and that the issue of the child is once more legitimately accepted within the framework of women's concerns. This reintegration, which came by overcoming earlier anxieties, owes a lot to Vinadi's drive, which arose from her vision and deep understanding. While it is true that I have been instrumental in this process, I owe a great deal to the understanding which I have gained from Vinadi, especially about making use of existing structures and processes to transcend and transform them, and conceiving of social action as generals think of wars and battles. Alas, I cannot do it half as gracefully as she does.

Honorary Sisterhood

As a result of this long association, by the end of the 1980s, I had begun to think of myself as a part of the women's movement and a social activist on behalf of women, even though I did not formally belong to any women's organisation and continued to concentrate on issues of children, education and communication. I recall with delight some of the surprising steps and processes

in that induction—being called out by Vinadi for a rally in protest against Prime Minister Morarjibhai Desai's infamous attack on women, which he withdrew as a result (my first experience of a street demonstration, at a very late age!); rushing a group to meet him again to save child care from budget cuts, at a meeting when he castigated us for our Westernisation (hairstyles perhaps?) and grimly prophesied that our 'crèche programme would crash'. I participated in several other such memorable events orchestrated by her.

The culmination of this phase was the campaign, again under Vinadi's leadership, for the Bill to set up the National Commission for Women in its original form, and the struggle to prevent its dilution by political and bureaucratic forces. After a sizzling opening round, in which Vinadi famously told the Chair (a member of the Planning Commission who wanted to leave the meeting after having inaugurated it) 'to sit down and listen to us', the campaign proceeded with intense behind-the-scenes activity, protracted negotiations and the submission of a detailed list of demands. A few months later, we were invited by the Government to a 'dialogue' on the revised Bill. Expecting another struggle, we rounded up members from all over India and rushed to Delhi. But it turned out to be not so much a dialogue as a celebration for the women's movement, as the United Front Government had agreed to almost all our demands, couched in our own language! To me it was a very significant moment, and I felt I had really come of age in the women's movement, by struggling for a cause which was not confined to child care issues. It also taught me a lot about strategising, planning, negotiating, networking, persuading, lobbying and other skills, which I later tried to put to use in working with FORCES.

Learning from Failure

Flushed with triumph, and convinced that not only was I a genuine soldier in the struggle for women's rights, but also knew how to go about the battle, I tried to transfer the victory to the

State level, and learnt my first lesson about the differences between a federal Government, which is in a somewhat distant relationship to 'the people' and a State Government, which is much closer to the grassroots and far more pragmatic in its approach. Armed with my status as the Vice-Chairperson of CWDS at the time, I felt no hesitation in playing a lead role in bringing together a loose group of women's organisations and engaging the State Government in a dialogue to set up the proposed State-level Women's Commission along the same broad-based and open lines as the National Commission. However, I had not reckoned with the very different realities at the ground level. To begin with, it was much more difficult to bring together individuals and groups with varying perceptions and to gain a consensus on this issue than it had seemed under Vinadi's magical leadership in Delhi. Perhaps it was linked to the difference between her charismatic presence and my own aggressive and acerbic style of functioning. But much more, it was the coldness and lack of receptivity of the Government of the day at both the bureaucratic and political levels. That was a real difference and a painful discovery. For example, throughout the campaign, we never once succeeded in getting a face-to-face meeting with either the Chief Minister, a woman, or any of her Cabinet colleagues, or even the senior bureaucrats. We lost—the State Commission was set up as a toothless appendage of the Department of Social Welfare, functioning like a minor advisory group, at the sweet will and pleasure of the Director, making polite noises over coffee and grumbling endlessly about their own powerlessness. I must also record that the State Government tried to buy some of us out by offering us places on this lapdog group, another ploy which I, in my political innocence, had not personally experienced before.

I licked my wounds, and sat down to meditate about how Vinadi would have handled the situation. An elderly female Ekalavya in Chennai, with the clay image of my guru before me, I mulled over old and new lessons in political strategy from Vinadi-in-absentia., chief of which was that it is necessary to give as much thought and attention to the means as to the end, and

that inclusiveness without compromising on principles is the key to attaining common goals even with differing styles.

Arriving

These lessons came in very useful in the next phase, when I was able slowly to pull the threads together, and work once more to bring child care issues on to the agenda of the women's movement through a coalition or network of groups, including women's organisations, to lobby for the cause of the young child. From the time I moved to Chennai in 1989, I had been groping for ways and means to launch the FORCES concept in Tamil Nadu, as TN-FORCES. With these experiences as fodder for growth, I managed to make a small beginning early in 1992. The movement grew steadily in both strength and direction from then on, my moment of greatest satisfaction being a smooth and graceful change of leadership after five years. But that too is another tale, not for the telling here.

So did a simple and pleasant friendship, which began casually from the children who brought us together, grow into a life-long relationship of shared commitment, shared even when we did not meet for long periods. But the story of my relationship with Vinadi also mirrors the other story, a coming together of two themes, criss-crossing and intertwining over the years, a journey to higher and higher levels of a spiral, constantly gaining new insights along the way, ever broadening and enriching the discourse, offering each other strength in the search for meaningful movement towards goals.

The meaning finally came to me on my 65th birthday, when, walking in the evening breeze along the sands of Kovalam beach, I learnt that it was Vinadi's birthday too, and that we were to celebrate it jointly that evening. With surprise, I registered that she was only six years older than me—a hardly noticeable age-difference at this stage in life, though I had always thought of her as a 'didi' to be looked up to. I understood then that Didi and I had become sisters. Salutations, my sister, on your 75th birthday!