
BROKEN CAN HEAL: **The Life and Work of** **Manjula Pradeep of India**

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2011 Women PeaceMakers Program

Made possible by the Fred J. Hansen Foundation

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A NOTE TO THE READER

In the following pages, you will find narrative stories about a Woman PeaceMaker, along with additional information to provide a deep understanding of a contemporary conflict and one person's journey within it. These complementary components include a brief biography of the peacemaker, a historical summary of the conflict, a timeline integrating political developments in the country with personal history of the peacemaker, a question-and-answer transcript of select interviews, and a table of best practices in peacebuilding as demonstrated and reflected on by the peacemaker during her time at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice.

The document is not intended necessarily to be read straight through, from beginning to end. Instead, you can use the historical summary or timeline as mere references or guides as you read the narrative stories. You can move straight to the table of best practices if you are interested in peacebuilding methods and techniques, or go to the question-and-answer transcript if you want to read commentary in the peacemakers' own words. The goal of this format is to reach audiences through multiple channels, providing access to the peacemakers' work, vision, lives and impact in their communities.

ABOUT THE WOMEN PEACEMAKERS PROGRAM

Made possible through a generous grant from the Fred J. Hansen Foundation, the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice's (IPJ) Women PeaceMakers Program annually hosts four women from around the world who have been involved in human rights and peacemaking efforts in their countries.

Women on the frontline of efforts to end violence and secure a just peace seldom record their experiences, activities and insights – as generally there is no time or, perhaps, they do not have formal education that would help them record their stories. The Women PeaceMakers Program is a selective program for leaders who want to document, share and build upon their unique peacemaking stories. Selected peacemakers join the IPJ for an eight-week residency.

Women PeaceMakers are paired with a Peace Writer to document in written form their story of living in conflict and building peace in their communities and nations. The peacemakers' stories are also documented on film by the IPJ's partner organization Sun & Moon Vision Productions. While in residence at the institute, Women PeaceMakers give presentations on their work and the situation in their home countries to the university and San Diego communities.

The IPJ believes that women's stories go beyond headlines to capture the nuance of complex situations and expose the realities of gender-based violence, thus providing an understanding of conflict and an avenue to its transformation. The narrative stories of Women PeaceMakers not only provide this understanding, but also show the myriad ways women construct peace in the midst of and after violence and war. For the realization of peace with justice, the voices of women – those severely affected by violent conflict and struggling courageously and creatively to build community from the devastation – must be recorded, disseminated and spotlighted.¹

BIOGRAPHY OF A WOMAN PEACEMAKER – MANJULA PRADEEP

A brazen human rights activist and lawyer, Manjula Pradeep has spent her life defending the rights of India’s women and Dalits, the “untouchables” of the Hindu caste system. Pradeep, a Dalit herself, knows intimately the intersectionality of grief and abuse that Dalit women experience at the bottom of all of India’s social hierarchies – caste, class and gender. But she has defied India’s patriarchal and caste-structured society. As the executive director of Navsarjan Trust, a grassroots Dalit rights organization based in India’s Gujarat state, Pradeep is a respected and prominent woman leader of the Dalit movement.



Photo credit: Sun & Moon Vision Productions

After completing her master’s degree in social work, Pradeep became Navsarjan’s first female employee. As she joined the organization’s mission to eliminate caste and gender-based discrimination, Pradeep observed more of the realities of life for Dalit women and researched atrocities committed against Dalits. Witnessing an old Dalit woman struggling for justice for her son who had been brutally beaten and killed by police, Pradeep realized the need for human rights issues to be fought not just in the streets, but also in the courts.

In her 20 years with Navsarjan, Pradeep has pushed for the inclusion of women in Navsarjan’s staff and leadership, as well as the entire Dalit rights movement. She has also trained hundreds of Dalit activists, provided legal aid and intervention for sexual violence and caste-based atrocities, and advocated for land reform and the eradication of manual scavenging (the illegal occupation of handling human excrement).



In 2008, Pradeep defended the case of a young Dalit girl who had endured long-term gang rape by six professors in her college. Navsarjan then took on more than 35 cases of sexual violence against minors and young women. Pradeep is also involved in the national and state level programs of the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights. She is an executive committee member of the International Dalit Solidarity Network and works to raise the visibility of untouchability as an international human rights issue.

Pradeep has taken two of the most significant social injustices in India, devoting her life to championing the dignity and rights of her own community. Her voice is an amplifier for those whom society silences, or simply ignores.

CONFLICT HISTORY – INDIA and the CASTE SYSTEM

Hinduism and the Caste System

According to the *vedas*, the sacred texts of Hinduism, man is organized into four *varnas*, or castes. These include the *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vaishyas* and *Shudras*. In the prevailing creation myth of Hinduism, Brahmins, who were born from the Creator's mouth, are traditionally considered the priests and educators; Kshatriyas, born from the Creator's arms, are kings and warriors; Vaishyas, born from the Creator's thighs, are merchants and artisans; and Shudras, born from the Creator's feet, are generally domestic servants. Within these four major castes are thousands of subcastes, each of which is traditionally associated with an occupation. Outside of the caste structure are Dalits, or "Untouchables," who occupy the lowest level of Indian society and have for the past 3,000 years been shunned socially, economically and spiritually. Today, the castes are formally organized as Forward Castes, including Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas; the Other Backwards Castes, which include the Shudras; and Scheduled Castes and Tribes, which include Dalits and tribal communities. Within the Dalit community there is an additional hierarchy of 752 subcastes, each tied to a specific caste-based occupation.

Although India's constitution made practicing untouchability illegal, the cultural influence of Hinduism and the caste system in modern Indian culture, even to non-Hindus, is difficult to overstate. Approximately 80 percent of Indians are Hindu, according to the 2001 census. Non-religious Hindus as well as Muslims, Christians and tribal communities in India often internalize the social implications of the caste system, even if they do not believe in the religious reasoning. Though some Dalits have converted from Hinduism to Christianity and Buddhism in an attempt to escape the caste system, newspapers today remain filled with stories about injustices and violence due to both caste tensions and inter-caste marriages.

Moghul Empire and Hindu Extremism

Much of the religious conflict in Gujarat today is tied to the legacy of the Moghul emperors in the 16th century.

The Moghuls, who practiced Islam, were responsible for much of the great architecture in India. Some of the structures, however, were set on significant Hindu religious sites. One, the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh, in northern India, was built in 1527. The mosque, one of the largest in the state, was a point of contention from its construction. It was built on the site of the alleged birthplace of Ram, one of the Hindu gods. The Moghuls had allegedly destroyed a temple to Ram in Ayodhya in order to build Babri Mosque, a wound that festered for more than four centuries before Hindu extremists destroyed the mosque in 1992.

L.K. Advani, then-president of the Bharatiya Janata Party, or BJP, is widely regarded as responsible for creating the divisive political climate that led to the destruction of the Babri Mosque. The BJP rose to power in Indian national politics in the early 1990s. It favors strong social and political conservatism, as well as a strong Hindu national identity. In 1992, as a ploy to draw political support, Advani, whose constituency was in Gujarat, organized a *rathiyatra*, or a chariot march, from Somnath Temple in Saurashtra in Gujarat to the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh. The

Somnath Temple, dedicated to Lord Shiva, another Hindu god, had been destroyed by a Mughal emperor nearly a thousand years prior. When the march arrived in Ayodhya in December 1992, Hindu sympathizers destroyed the mosque. In response, riots broke out between Hindus and Muslims across Gujarat, with violence escalating especially in Surat, the commercial capital of Gujarat. An estimated 200 people were killed, mostly Muslims, and 19,000 Muslims were displaced from their homes.

Ten years later, in February 2002, communal violence broke out again when a Muslim mob allegedly set fire to two train cars returning from Ayodhya. The train, stopped at Godhra Station in Gujarat, was filled with *karsevaks*, or Hindu pilgrims paid by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), another Hindu nationalist group, to build a temple in Ayodhya. More than 50 Hindus were killed. In the subsequent weeks, coordinated violence against Muslims in the state, sanctioned by the BJP, which governed both state and national politics at the time and was led by the VHP and other Hindu nationalist groups, led to the death of more than 2,000 people. The majority of those killed were Muslims and other people marginalized by the conservative Hindu establishment, including the poor and the Dalits.

The Constitution and Caste Divisions

The British slowly gained control of trading ports, consolidating land and power in India throughout the latter half of the 18th century. The British did not recognize the caste system as religious dogma, but rather saw it primarily as a racial and socioeconomic organizational system. In the latter part of British rule, human rights and civil rights activists such as Mahatma Gandhi and Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar began to emerge, fighting for both Indian independence and an end to the 3,000-year-old caste system.

Ambedkar, a Dalit human rights activist, lawyer and scholar, chaired the committee that framed the Indian Constitution. Educated in the United States and England, Ambedkar was a lifelong activist, focused especially on Dalit issues. He worked to eliminate the caste system by, among other measures, abolishing untouchability in the constitution. He and Gandhi, a peer, held opposing views on addressing untouchability in the constitution. Ambedkar proposed a separate electorate for the Dalits, or Untouchables. Gandhi, however, opposed the separate electorate, positing that by implementing a separate electorate, the entire Hindu community would divide and collapse. Gandhi started a fast, which he held until Ambedkar agreed to the Poona Pact in 1932, a compromise that created a reservation system with quotas for Dalits and other marginalized groups, such as tribals, in government organizations and schools.

The tribal communities, which fall outside of the Hindu hierarchy and lived primarily on lands untouched by the British, were slowly incorporated into Indian society after independence in 1947. As new local governments were organized, previously free land was taken as government property. As a result, the tribal communities that lived in those forests often became bonded agricultural workers, vulnerable to labor, wage and sexual abuses by their new landlords.

Gujarat and Land Division

The state of Gujarat was created in 1960 when the former state of Bombay was separated into Gujarat and Maharashtra, mostly along language lines. The primary landowners in Gujarat after

the partition from Maharashtra were the Patel family, a name that today is synonymous with landlord and business owner. The Gujarat Agricultural Land Ceiling Act in 1973, however, limited the amount of land held by any single entity to 54 acres. Surplus acreage was in theory distributed to landless agricultural laborers, such as the Dalits and tribals, but the process was rarely without conflict. As Gujarat continues to develop, land is frequently seized by corporations, again displacing landless laborers.

Legal Acts and Protections

Since India's independence in 1947, the government has passed a number of legal acts critical to the work of the Dalit rights organization Navsarjan Trust.

In terms of labor, the most significant acts include the Gujarat Agricultural Land Ceiling Act in 1973 (see above), the Minimum Wage Act in 1948 and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in 2005. The Minimum Wage Act was designed especially to protect marginalized communities from labor exploitation, and was the first piece of legislation to formalize a comprehensive wage structure across industries, including agriculture. The National Rural Employment Act guarantees that all unskilled laborers living in a rural community will be granted 100 days of manual labor every year in their own villages.

In terms of protections against violence, the most significant acts include the Prevention of Atrocities Act in 1989 and the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act in 2005. The Prevention of Atrocities Act specifically categorizes violence against Dalits and tribals as atrocities, subject to specific prosecution. Though largely considered ineffective – the overwhelming majority of cases tried under the Atrocities Act end in acquittals – the law has proved helpful as an empowerment tool for marginalized communities. The Protection of Women Act is designed to protect women in a household from physical, sexual and economic abuse, including wives, mothers and daughters. Demands with regard to dowry are considered abuse, as well as evicting women from the household, as is often the case with widows.

In terms of social justice, the most significant acts include the Right to Information Act in 2005 and the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act in 2010. The Right to Information Act allows organizations such as Navsarjan access to government documents, which can help in prosecuting land abuse cases as well as corruption. The Education Act, meanwhile, mandates free education for every child in India between the ages of 6 years old and 14 years old, with the goal of ensuring that poor and marginalized children have basic education. It also requires that private schools set aside some seats for poor children.

Caste Today

According to the 2001 census (the most recent data available), Dalits make up more than 16 percent of the population of India, or some 167 million people. In Gujarat, where Dalits comprise a relatively low percentage of the population compared to some other Indian states, the Dalit community numbers approximately 3.6 million. More than 80 percent of Dalits in the state are agricultural laborers, yet only half of the population owns any land, subjecting Dalits to the abuses of landlords.

Overall in India, half of the Dalit population, about 84 million people, live in poverty. More than 103 million Dalits are illiterate, including both adults and children. Nearly 100 different types of untouchability are practiced in rural Gujarat, including the separation of Dalit and non-Dalit children in schools, public facilities and temples.

But thanks to the efforts of organizations such as Navsarjan, the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights, the International Dalit Solidarity Network, the Asian Human Rights Commission and Human Rights Watch, caste-based discrimination and caste-based violence are becoming national and international concerns. Despite the entrenched cultural norms surrounding caste, there is hope that in coming years the world's oldest form of discrimination may be eliminated.



INTEGRATED TIMELINE

Political Developments in India and *Personal History of Manjula Pradeep*

- 1932 The Poona Pact is signed, creating a reservation system for Scheduled Castes, or Untouchables, in Indian government.
- 1947 India gains independence; Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, a Dalit and human rights activist, is appointed as head of the committee to draft the new constitution.
- 1948 The Minimum Wage Act is enacted in order to ensure the implementation of minimum wages for agricultural laborers.
- 1950 The Constitution of India is adopted, abolishing untouchability.
- 1960 The state of Gujarat is created.
- 1968 *The Pradeep family migrates from Uttar Pradesh to Gujarat.*
- 1969 Communal violence breaks out in Gujarat, killing 2,500.

Manjula is born on October 6.
- 1973 The Gujarat Agricultural Land Ceiling Act is enacted in order to distribute lands more equitably among landowners and agricultural workers.

Manjula starts school.
- 1981 High-caste students in Gujarat protest the reservation system in educational systems; 42 people die.
- 1984 Indira Gandhi, prime minister of India, is assassinated.
- 1987 *Manjula starts her undergraduate work.*
- 1989 *Manjula’s cousin Chaman is murdered in an honor killing.*

Martin Macwan officially registers Navsarjan Trust as a nongovernmental organization (NGO).

The Prevention of Atrocities Act is enacted to fight systemic violence, delineating certain crimes against Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes as “atrocities.”
- 1990 *Mr. Hingorani, a professor at Manjula’s college, encourages her to pursue social work.*

Manjula finishes college and starts graduate studies in social work.

1991 Rajiv Gandhi, prime minister of India and son of Indira Gandhi, is assassinated.

1992 *Manjula finishes her master's degree and starts work at Navsarjan.*

The Babri Mosque is destroyed in Ayodhya and Muslim General Riots break out in Surat. Elections are held in Gujarat.

Manjula starts her field work for Navsarjan and takes on her first case of a Dalit woman whose son was beaten in police custody.

1994 Navsarjan opens its office in Ahmedabad.

Manjula starts studying law.

1995 *Manjula begins working with bonded laborers in Padra and joins the board of Navsarjan.*

The Bharatiya Janata Party, a conservative Hindu nationalist political party, comes to power in Gujarat with a two-thirds majority. The BJP has remained in power in Gujarat.

1996 *Manjula begins training women community leaders.*

1997 *Manjula finishes her law degree and travels to the United States for the first time.*

Manjula organizes a major rally in Padra, Gujarat.

1998 The National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights, an association of human rights groups in India, is founded.

1999 *Manjula's office is attacked by people representing the Hindu right wing.*

2000 *Manjula starts training 40 women employees to take leadership roles in Navsarjan, the first time the organization has focused on women.*

Elections in Sarsavani, Gujarat, lead to violence between landowners and agricultural workers.

Manjula organizes a protest representing 3,000 Dalits in which Martin Macwan coined the term "Dalit Shakti," or Dalit Power.

Navsarjan is recognized by the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice & Human Rights for its human rights activism.

- 2001** Earthquake in Gujarat kills 20,000 people; through its relief work, corruption is discovered in Navsarjan.
- Manjula travels to Geneva to represent the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) at the United Nations Preparatory Committee for the U.N. World Conference.*
- U.N. World Conference Against Racism, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance takes place in Durban, South Africa; caste issues are tabled for another date.
- Manjula moves to Ahmedabad from Baroda City, living on her own for the first time.*
- 2002** *Manjula is invited to Rutgers University in New Jersey to participate in the Center for Women's Global Leadership program.*
- A terrorist attack on a train of Hindu workers in Godhra leads to the beginning of a Muslim genocide in Gujarat; through their relief work Navsarjan becomes more of a human rights organization rather than one working exclusively on Dalit issues.
- Manjula takes a sabbatical for a year to work at the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation in New Delhi and help develop its country aid program.*
- 2004** The Indian National Congress party, a progressive political party, gains control of the central government of India.
- Martin Macwan announces he is stepping down as executive director of Navsarjan.*
- Manjula is elected executive director of Navsarjan.*
- 2005** The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence, the Right to Information and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee acts are all passed.
- Manjula takes steps to organize Navsarjan and eliminate corruption within the organization.*
- 2006** NCDHR organizes the National Conference on Violence Against Dalit Women in New Delhi.
- Manjula speaks at the International Conference of Dalit Women at The Hague.*
- 2008** *Manjula becomes a member of the International Dalit Solidarity Network, based in Copenhagen.*

June – Manjula addresses the European Parliament in Brussels on caste-based discrimination in South Asia.

2009 *Manjula helps win a major case convicting six professors of gang rape and unnatural offenses.*

2010 The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act is passed.

2011 *September – Manjula joins the Women PeaceMakers Program at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice at the University of San Diego in San Diego, Calif.*

The News

FEBRUARY 2008

She knew immediately something was different.

On the other end of the line, her colleague Dinesh was agitated, but his voice was also tinted with anticipation.

“Manjula, I am with R.M. Patel. Something big has happened. There was a gang rape at Primary Teacher’s Training College in Patan. A Dalit girl. Eighteen years old. Six professors. Look online. I think the media is already there.”

The state secretary of social justice and development? Manjula swiveled to her computer and went to ndtv.com. He was right. Cameras and crowds were starting to swarm on the Primary Teacher’s Training College (PTC) in Patan, where a crowd of students had begun rioting against the teachers. A girl had confessed that she had been gang raped by the six professors at the school, and the other students at the all-girls government college were protesting. The girls, in their rage, had trapped four of the men in a room and beaten them with fists and sticks. Police had arrested the four and were out hunting for the other two accused. Hundreds of parents and community members had already gathered at the school, and their anger seemed to vibrate from her computer screen. Already? What was happening here? Manjula stared at the pictures for another moment, and snapped back to Dinesh’s voice.

“Manjula, what should we do next? I spoke to the field members in Sami. They’re the closest to Patan. They sent the girl to the civil hospital in Ahmedabad. Pushpa went to the hospital to see how we can help. What are you going to do?”

“I’ll leave now. This girl needs us.” Manjula hung up unceremoniously and called for her secretary, who ran from the next room.

“Naresh, get Bhailal. Tell him to get the jeep ready, I need to go to Ahmedabad.”

Naresh nodded and ran out. It would take an hour to get to Ahmedabad from the Navsarjan Trust campus in Nani Devti, but there was plenty to do along the way. Manjula thought down the list of people she should call – some reporters from *Indian Express*, the *Times of India* and *DNA*, and the police superintendent from Patan. She narrowed her eyes – the education minister, Anandi Patel, had close ties with Narendra Modi, chief minister of Gujarat and member of the extremist BJP political party.² Both were already adversaries. Who knew what Anandi would do to keep this case quiet? A Dalit girl gang raped by six teachers at a government school. This *was* big.

Manjula grabbed her Blackberry and mobile phone, glancing quickly around her office for anything else she might need. She straightened her *salwar kameez*. Her driver would be ready by now. It was time to go.

MAY 1992

The doorbell rang out sharply. Manjula looked up from her books, startled. Who would be coming to the house now?

Her sister Anjana came from the kitchen to open the door, wiping her hands on a small dishtowel. She glanced quickly at Manjula's array of papers and raised an eyebrow. "I know you think college is more important, but you should really be helping us make the *chapatis, Goti,*"³ she said as she passed her.

Manjula had already opened her mouth to protest when she saw who was at the door. The postman held a thin white paper delicately in his hands. A telegram! Immediately she felt her chest tighten. At four rupees apiece, a telegram could only mean bad news.

"Where is your father?" the postman asked. Anjana, face drawn, silently ushered him to the living room, where their father was sipping *chai* and reading the *Indian Express*. Manjula tiptoed behind her, twisting her hands nervously. Her brother Sanju also crept up to them as their father called for their elder brother, Lalit, and their mother. The postman slipped past them out the door again, but Manjula hardly registered his presence, fixed on the telegram.

Her father was standing with his mouth slightly ajar, reading and rereading the card. Lalit and Ma rushed to him, and Manjula strained to hear their hushed, bowed conversation from the doorway. Lalit, 30 years old, was privy to these adult discussions, but Manjula, nearly 10 years younger, knew she and her sister and younger brother weren't welcome. Abruptly, her father shoved the telegram into Lalit's hands and pushed his way past Manjula to head outside. But the usual tingles of anger she felt toward him were supplanted by a growing anxiety.

"*Bhaiyya,*⁴ what does the telegram say?" she asked her elder brother hesitantly.

Her brother looked at her, his face pale. He handed her the telegram, red letters now smudged with fingerprints.

CHAMAN HAS EXPIRED.

Chaman? Her favorite childhood playmate? He was her cousin-brother.⁵ They used to chase after the ice cream vendor's bicycle, smiling as he scooped soft vanilla into their cups. When they went home to Asipala, her family always stopped first in Aligarh to visit the Prasad family for a few days so that Daddy could visit with Uncle Raghunath, Chaman's father. Chaman always could find her, no matter where she hid in village games of hide-and-seek. She remembered how out of breath she was, playing *gillidanda* with him, because he'd hit the stick so far for her to catch. *He was dead? How? Why?* In the tinny distance, she heard Sanju cry out. Her family melted away from her, grief and dread sucking the air from the room.



Later, she learned. Chaman, a Dalit boy, had fallen in love with a young girl from the *yadan* caste, or small farmers of the Other Backwards Castes (OBC).⁶ When the girl's brother discovered

their relationship, he and two friends invited Chaman for a drink at a local hotel not far from his home. He declined alcohol, so the boys gave him hot milk instead.

The milk was poisoned with sleeping pills. After Chaman passed out, they dragged him to a construction site near the railroad tracks. Manjula turned the scene over and over in her mind, like a rolling boulder. *Was he awake when they stabbed him in the neck with the iron rods? Did he cry out? Maybe he was unconscious. Maybe he felt nothing.*

She pictured his slim body and serious brown eyes, his hands as they gripped the gillidanda stick. She tried to squeeze out the image of blood, of Chaman gored like a bull. His crime was love.

No. His crime was falling in love outside his caste.

The Discovery

FEBRUARY 2008

Manjula entered the classroom with trepidation. Last night at the hospital, Gita had jumped off the bed and grabbed Manjula so tightly that Manjula could feel her heartbeat. She was frail – a paper doll in a white salwar kameez. The February chill had seeped in, and the girl shivered in Manjula's arms. The embrace was binding. They were strangers before last night. Pushpa had lied to the police guarding Gita's hospital bed, telling them that Manjula was a relative so that she could meet the girl. But 12 hours later, it already felt like truth. Gita had shared her horror story, and it was now Manjula's too.

She sat on the low bench in the front of the room and closed her eyes.

It was the beginning of school, in August. My parents sent me here. I wanted to be a nurse and I scored high in my class in my exams. But we had no money. My father drives an auto rickshaw and he even took one of my brothers out of school and made him drive so I could go because I was smartest. But we didn't even have money for the hostel at PTC. All the girls are required to live on campus. So these six professors, they said they would pay for my hostel fees. My father was so grateful, he said I should touch the feet of these six men whenever I see them and pay my respects. They were paying for me.

Manjula opened her eyes and looked to her right, out the open door. Across the hallway was the teacher's lounge.

Ashwin Parmar, the psychology professor, was the one who called me first. I was in the room after class and he told me to come into the teacher's lounge. Mahendra Prajapati and Manish Parmar were both in there too. They pulled me down on the floor and unknotted their pants. They held down my hands and Ashwin teacher raped me. When he was done he held me down and Mahendra raped me. I wanted to die. When they were all done they told me if I said anything I would be kicked out of school and my father would have to pay fees. It happened again and again and later it was Suresh Patel, and Atul Patel and Kiran Patel, too. All of the professors, they all raped me. They told me I was enjoying it and I was using them for my own pleasure. It was in the lounge and sometimes the computer classroom. It happened 14 times. I did not know what to do. I kept fainting whenever I saw them, I was so afraid. Finally I told Bela, my roommate. She told her father. And now I am here.

Manjula shuddered. Six men. Her eyes itched with tears. She could feel the pressure building from her ears, the low roar of pain rising from her throat. She wasn't sure, when it erupted, who she was crying for.

JULY 1972

Bunty opened his small palm, and Manjula's eyes lit up. Her favorite purple lollipops! And some of the small sweet orange candies, that looked so cunningly like real oranges. She looked up wonderingly at him.

“Those uncles who are living over there gave me candy,” 4-year-old Bunty said with authority to Manjula and her friend, Bindu. “They are also calling you if you want candy.”

Manjula glanced over at the faded white house across the street and twisted the hem of her frock in her hands. The uncles from Tamil Nadu?⁷ There was one old fat one and two young men. Ma and Daddy never spoke to them. None of the workers in the worker’s colony spoke to them, not even their next door neighbor, Mr. Anwar, the nice Muslim man. It was strange how they lived alone, those dark men from the south, without any wives or children. All of the other workers, like Daddy, and Bunty and Bindu’s fathers, lived with their families. And why were they home so early? It was hardly noon, and none of the other workers came home from lunch before 1 o’clock. Manjula, just 3 years old, knew something was funny about those men.

Still, the candies were alluring. Daddy had just dropped her off from preschool, and she hadn’t eaten yet. Bunty closed his fist over the orange balls and stuck the lollipop into his mouth with satisfaction. Manjula raised her courage. “Bindu, let us go.”

The two girls skittered across the street to the bare dirt yard in front of the uncles’ house, the noontime heat pounding on their short dark curls. Before they were able to knock, the door opened. The fat old man stood there smiling, with an odd gleam in his eyes, and reached out his hands to grasp their small arms.

“Come in, come in,” he said, still smiling strangely. “Would you like some candies?” the old man asked, a slight quiver in his voice. He closed the door behind them, and the bare living room went dim. Manjula could just make out the two iron chairs in the corner, where the young uncles were sitting, and two iron cots in the attached bedroom. There was another cot under the window in the main room. There was none of the familiar coziness of her own home just across the street, where her mother had painted the walls of their small government house an appealing sky blue and planted berry and guava trees in the garden, just visible outside the bedroom window. The curtains in this old man’s house were drawn.

Manjula and Bindu nodded shyly, and the old man produced a handful of those sweet, citrusy orange candies, which were at least 10 *paise* – Manjula marveled at his riches. She and Bindu each took a few, and Manjula popped one into her mouth, savoring the flavor.

“Come here,” the old man said, leading Manjula by the arm to the cot in the main room. “Climb up.” She glanced back at Bindu, who was walking slowly to the bedroom with the two young men. Her narrow shoulders looked clenched, and even thinner than usual. Bindu was never quite as plump or healthy as Manjula.

“It’s hot,” the old man murmured. “There’s nobody in your house, right? Why don’t you take your rest here? Just lie down and sleep.”

A tiny fist of fear in her chest began to clench. Manjula hesitated, and the old man’s grip on her arm tightened. She could smell a faint sourness from his *lungi*, which was wrapped loosely around his waist. It looked stained, the edges fraying slightly. “If you want candy you have to sleep here,” he said. “Don’t you like this candy?”

She looked up at his strange face. It was time for a rest, after all; the afternoon heat was growing. Despite her distaste for this fat old man, Manjula was growing sleepy in the dim, warm room. Still gripping the candy, she nodded and the old man picked her up and sat her on the cot. Her feet dangled a few inches from the floor. Her own cot at home was much softer, but she laid down.

His hand, when it touched her stomach, was heavy and rough. Terrified, Manjula caught her breath, and stared up at his broad cheekbones and his unshaven chin, bristly white hairs glowing in the dim. His skin was dark, and his white hair stuck damply to the back of his thick neck. His lungi shifted and shook as his left hand disappeared underneath the dingy fabric. She bit her tongue. This was not a rest. This man looked happy, but in a strange way, in an ugly way, and it did not feel right. The lungi kept moving, and his leg knocked against the iron cot, which scraped a few inches across the cement floor. The cot screamed in protest, but Manjula could not make a sound herself.

His big hand pulled down her underwear. She squeezed her eyes shut. This was not right, what this uncle was doing. Where was Bindu? Was she with the other uncles? Should she speak up against the old man? He pushed his hand inside her. The candy went dry in her mouth and her body felt bound by rope, that small fist of fear now hammering desperately against her insides. *No*.

When she opened her eyes, when it was over, she saw the two young men standing over the old man's broad shoulders, looking down at her with that same strange greedy look. Her paralysis broke. Fumbling, she jumped off the cot and pulled up her underpants. She ran to the door.

They stood still and silent, looking after her. She threw open the door and sprinted across the street into the sunlight, where she saw Bindu standing, alone, in front of the green henna trees edging her house. She could see Bindu was still holding her sweets in her hand, and Manjula became acutely aware of the bitter taste in her mouth, the halfway-melted sticky oranges in her hand, the feeling of her skin in her yellow flowered frock, the beating sun on her head, the sensation of the old man's rough dirty fingers inside her.

She spit the candy from her mouth and unfurled her clenched fingers. The sweets dropped slowly into the dirt, rolling into the dust.

The Pressure

MARCH 2008

Tension crackled in the room.

“I do not think we should pursue the case,” Babu-bhai said. He gripped his daughter’s forearm and stared past Manjula’s shoulder. Gita sat on the cot in their living room with her head down. Beside her, her mother twisted her hands together. Cold cups of tea sat on the low table between them. None of the three would meet Manjula’s eyes.

Panic threatened to overwhelm Manjula. It had been weeks since the case broke, and she was here in Jetalvasna village again, at Gita’s home, trying to convince Gita’s parents to take Navsarjan’s support and fight the six professors in court. She strained her neck, trying to will Gita to look at her. She wouldn’t.

“We are only here for Gita’s interest,” said Manjula, for what felt like the tenth time. Her words echoed in the room. “We want to get justice for her. Isn’t that what you want also?”

When there was no response, she pressed harder. “What is this about? We want nothing but the best for the girl.”

Gita’s father rose suddenly. “I do not believe you! I think you want to protect the rapists.”

Manjula reeled as if she had been slapped. “What?”

“I have heard of Navsarjan. Don’t you keep Dalits out of jail? I know you do lawsuits. You just want to help those men who hurt my daughter.” Babu-bhai was heaving. “My caste leaders came to me. I know what you will do.”

Caste leaders! Manjula’s nostrils flared. They would. In nearly 20 years in working at Navsarjan, she had met just a handful of caste leaders who weren’t corrupt, taking money from politicians or influential families in order to sway their communities. They rarely stood as moral guardians or true representatives of their castes, as they were supposed to. Each of the 752 subcastes of Dalits had their own set of regional leaders, and they were often at odds with each other. So the *chamar*⁸ leaders had been here, talking to Babu-bhai?

“Yes, Navsarjan does protect Dalits, but only if their rights are violated and not if they have committed a crime,” Manjula said. “But we also protect women and girls from caste and gender-based violence. And is your daughter not also a Dalit?”

“But those Parmar men, they are weavers. You will want to protect them more because they are of a higher Dalit subcaste. You do not know what it is like, as a chamar. It is so difficult.”

I do, thought Manjula. *I am like you*. But she kept quiet.

MAY 1981

She heard them before she could see them. Four of her elder cousins, Jwala, Chhitar, Kalva and Rajkumar, were laughing and complaining as they arrived at the circle of mud homes, slowly pulling their big four-wheeled cart behind them. All handsome men, they were sweating profusely despite the evening chill, and their shirts clung to their backs.

It was only when they dragged the cart up near the well that Manjula could see what was inside it.

A buffalo. It was so big it nearly spilled out of the bed, and Manjula cringed, backing away until she felt the low cement wall of the water well at her back.

“What is that, Goti?” asked Sanju, her younger brother, huddling closer to her.

“A buffalo, shhh,” Manjula said, regaining a bit of composure. But what was the buffalo doing here? In her 12 years of life, they had visited her father’s village in Uttar Pradesh⁹ nearly every summer, but she hadn’t seen a dead buffalo before. Maybe this buffalo was just sick? She knew her cousins here in Asipala were poor – they didn’t have kitchens, like her family had in Gujarat, or even toilets. Whenever she had the urge, she had to walk nearly two kilometers to the farms to go in the fields. But why did they have this animal?

Daddy was holding court and smoking on a cot under a neem tree, while other relatives stood around him, chatting. They all respected *Kunwar-ji*, as they called him, because he had gotten an education and had a government job. Neither he nor anybody else was paying any mind to the buffalo, or her cousins, who were now heaving and pulling the buffalo by its legs onto the ground. The women had begun to cook dinner on the outdoor *chulas*, and the acrid smoke from the cow dung they burned for fuel was thick in the air, combining with the smell of *dal* and fresh chapati.

Chhitar appeared from behind his home, wielding a 2-foot-long *dharua*. “This hefty one, she will be good, *baa?*” he grinned at Manjula, motioning toward the hulking animal with the knife. She wrinkled her brow. *What?* Taking care to give a wide berth to the animal as her cousins huddled over it, she walked to her father and tapped him on the shoulder.

“Daddy, I want to talk to you,” Manjula said. He glanced briefly at her over his shoulder and returned to his conversation.

“Daddy, I need to talk to you right now,” she said more urgently, her voice rising. She felt the conversation hush behind her. “Why have they brought this buffalo here? Why isn’t a butcher cutting this meat?”

Behind her, Jwala erupted into laughter and her father’s back stiffened. Chhitar had passed his elder brother the knife, and Jwala now pointed it at her as he squatted over the dead animal. “Don’t you know we are chamars?”

The unfamiliar word rang through her ears. Chamar. She stared hard at her father, waiting for him to meet her eyes and offer some explanation. He was looking down at the ground, curling his bare toes into the dirt.

“Chamar?” she repeated, her skin prickling in the chill.

Jwala’s laughter quieted, and, more sympathetically, he gave her a small smile. “It is our caste occupation. We are leather tanners. This is our family’s work.” He bent to slice the buffalo’s neck, and Manjula averted her eyes.

Chamar. So that is what it meant, her caste. Tears began seeping from her eyes, and she made her way away from the buffalo, from her abashed and silent father, from the deepening smell of blood and animal.

But she could not walk away from this word, chamar. It echoed in her head with each step, drummed in with the rhythmic slapping of women shaping chapati with their hands. Chamar. This was the life her father ran away from, what he tried to hide by giving the family a false name, Pradeep, a generic name not tied to a caste. But today, being a chamar had chased Manjula down. This was why her cousins lived on the outskirts of the village, why they had this cart, why there was no butcher. This was what the children in school wanted to know when they teased her for being a Pradeep, for not knowing her caste. She could now answer their questions. Chamar. This was who she was, and who she never knew.

The Intimidation

MARCH 2008

Manjula sat in the garden of the Navsarjan campus, turning the suspicions over in her head. She chewed the inside of her cheek.

Who was pushing the caste leaders? Who was giving them money to bribe the family? Why did everyone want Gita to be quiet? This has to be the responsibility of Narendra Modi. He doesn't care anything about his constituents. He only cares about the BJP. Is it because Gita is a Dalit? Maybe he believes she deserved this. No. This must be bigger than that. It's a government school. And it was government employees who raped the girl. Anandi Patel must be trying to keep it quiet because she's embarrassed this happened under her watch. So. The government is trying to bribe the family through the caste leaders so they aren't shamed by more scandal.

A bird chirped, and Manjula looked up at the champa tree beside her. Just beyond, she could see the wall of the hostel, where students and employees stayed when they took training courses on campus. On its side was a 10-foot mural of human rights leaders, painted by volunteers. Through the bright flowers of the tree, she could see the faces of B.R. Ambedkar,¹⁰ Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy. Her stomach unknotted slightly. She would have to convince Gita's family to stand up. She knew it was dangerous to stand up to the BJP. The powerful pro-Hindu party was known to use violent means to promote Hindu traditions and quash any opposition. But she had done it before. She would do it again.

FEBRUARY 1999

The gray iron gate was ajar, and dark mud footprints tracked their way into the office courtyard. The slippers were out of order. Some women in the training session must have run out of the office without even putting their slippers back on, and their small sandals were kicked out into the middle of the courtyard, in stark difference to their usual tidy rows.

From Hansa's frantic phone call that morning, Manjula knew her field office in Padra had been attacked by a group of men, but she wasn't prepared for what she saw. Fist-sized pieces of brick and cement littered the stairs leading up to her office. Tarry black gravel made a trail up to the first floor,¹¹ as though the outside world was trying to work its way into the building.

There was a dull silence in the sunshine-filled office, which usually bustled with the laughter of teenage girls at their sewing machines, their teachers' admonitions and the occasional calls of "Manjula-ben, come look!" This office was home to leadership-building sessions, vocational training such as sewing lessons so girls could break out of caste-based occupations, and legal aid clinics for the entire locality. But today, no. *A killing silence*, Manjula thought. The sunlight was unnerving. Dark things had happened here. She touched a pair of scissors, splayed open. A bolt of cloth spilled from a work table onto the floor, and a stool rocked slightly on its side. She heard Hansa's voice play in her head again, and could see the ghostly figures acting out the violence in the room.

They sent an old woman to the office. She pretended to want to come in for training but we told her it was only for the members and she got angry. Then the men pushed past her and started grabbing girls. They kicked Lalita in the stomach. They pulled Asha by the hair out of her chair. All the girls got out, but the men chased them down the street. They are not hurt, just scared. They don't know who the men were. I don't know. Manjula, we need you. Please hurry.

I know who these men are, Manjula thought grimly. Who could the attackers be but the Patels¹² – the dominant subcaste of landlords – and the rest of the farm owners who were angry about the union and cooperative she had organized? For the past two years, ever since the rally she led in Padra and the ensuing fallout, tension had been growing in the community between her and the dominant caste leaders in area. The landlords had begun spreading rumors that Navsarjan was a missionary organization, bent on converting Dalits to Christianity to escape the Hindu caste system. The rumors had stoked the ire of the local BJP-affiliated fundamentalist groups, who had been organizing attacks on missionaries in the region. Manjula knew they were pressuring the girls in her group and her neighbors to push her out of the office. She looked out the window into the empty street outside, wondering how many of her neighbors might have seen the attack, knew it was coming. This was just an escalation of their anger.

Manjula sat down suddenly, a sinking feeling in her belly. What would she do next? Would she have to move again? It was hard enough finding this office. Would the girls be brave enough to come back? She looked at the disarray in the room, freshly painted in creams and yellows, mud caking the swept floor. She rubbed a corner of orange cotton in her hand, and heard the low baying of a cow in the distance. She remembered the first day she moved in, how bright the office was. The girls' young voices tinkled in her memory, and her hand flexed involuntarily. A small flame of anger ignited, erasing some of the pain. *So, they want to fight us? If their goal is to close us down, we'll just work harder. I'll organize a protest program. I will bring back all of those girls, grow this office even more. I will show everyone what these Patels have done to us and our people.*

She stood up and walked purposefully to her desk. She would condemn this attack and show the Patels how many Dalits there were that supported Navsarjan's work. It would be at least an hour before the police showed up to take her complaint, and she had work to do.

The Threat

MAY 2008

Manjula rode to the PTC campus with her heart in her throat. It wasn't happening. Gita wouldn't do this. Since her father had finally agreed to pursue the legal case against the teachers, Gita had held up fine. She had even returned to school and taken her exams. The school had replaced the six male professors with female teachers. She thought Gita was doing well. At least as well as could be expected.

But when she arrived at the principal's office, Gita was sitting limply, as if all the air had been sucked out of her. When the young girl saw her, she ran to grab Manjula, as if it was the first day they met.

"Her roommate found this," said the principal. "Take it."

In her girlish hand were a few simple words.

I do not want to live anymore.

"What is this, Gita?" Manjula said, lifting Gita's chin with her fingers.

When Gita didn't respond, the principal spoke up. "Bela found this in her room. She called me immediately. I called Babu-bhai, and he is coming now. Gita can't stay in the school anymore. We cannot take responsibility for her death."

Manjula glared at the principal. She opened her mouth to speak, but Gita suddenly covered in her arms. Her father had walked into the office with two of the local chamar caste leaders and a policeman. His stride surged with anger. Manjula told him that Gita had made a decision.

"Gita wants to come to stay at Navsarjan's campus."

The principal was taken aback. "What? She is going to go home to her family?"

"No!" Gita yelled suddenly as her father drew near. "No!"

"What happened to you?" Babu-bhai shouted. "Why do you trust this woman? You don't even know her!"

Every nerve ending in Manjula's skin seemed to come alive. "I am only looking out for her," she said.

Gita burrowed further into Manjula's arms. Manjula tightened them around her thin frame. She didn't care what she had to do. She would take custody of this girl. She would protect her. Her father wouldn't hurt her.

MAY 1984

Her father's voice electrified her, and made Manjula jump from the chair where she was sketching out her homework for school.

“I know everything about you! Everything! I know what you are!”

Daggers of fear and anger tore through Manjula as she ran from her bedroom to the living room, where her father was standing over her mother with his hand curled in a fist. It was happening again. Ma was on her knees, banging her head against the cement wall. He was hurling insults at her, accusing her of having an affair.

Before Manjula could rush to her mother's side, her father grabbed Ma's thin shoulder and pulled her away from the wall, shaking her. Ma's teeth chattered. Manjula could already see the redness on her mother's forehead, exacerbating the near continual bruise that marred her creamy skin.

Manjula looked imploringly at Anjana, who had crept up behind her. Her elder sister hesitated. She almost took a half step toward their father, but his glare braced her as if she had walked into a wall. Anjana glanced at Manjula, then down at the ground. If only Lalit were home – he was 25 years old, and maybe he could do something to stop their father. But Manjula knew it wasn't likely that Lalit would step in. None of the children ever stood up to their father, except Manjula, and she paid for it with lashes.

Her father released Ma's arm, and she crumpled to the floor. Maybe it was over? But then Ma half crawled, half ran into the kitchen, slamming the door closed behind her.

“I want to die, I want to die!” she screamed.

The family stood in stunned silence. Panic burst from Manjula's chest, and made it nearly impossible to breathe.

“Daddy, open the door! Help her!” Manjula shouted, pulling him to the door. Icicles grew along her spine. Her parents had had fights before, but this was different. Suddenly unfrozen, her father bolted the three strides to the kitchen door.

“Open this door! Open it right now!”

He slammed his shoulder repeatedly into the door, just as Ma had slammed her forehead against the wall. The door gave way and he made a lunging motion, as if to grab his wife. Pressed behind him, Manjula ran into his back when he stopped short.

Ma was standing, draped in fabric and oil. She held the metal kerosene jerrycan limply in her right hand. The sharp smell of the gas filled the kitchen, making Manjula's eyes tear. She rubbed her palms hard against her eyes and frantically scanned the room for the long oven matches. They were nowhere to be seen.

“Why are you doing this?” Daddy shouted at her. He was cemented in place, as if the only thing he could move was his mouth.

“I am tired, I am tired, I am tired of your talk,” Ma said calmly. She looked straight at her husband, who suddenly seemed to deflate. He shifted from her gaze and looked instead at the puddles of oil gathering at her feet.

“It is because of you! It was your wish that she die!” Manjula screamed at her father, pounding her fist on his shoulder. He tilted his head and looked at his daughter as if he had never seen her before. His lips parted, and closed again. Without another glance at his wife, he turned and walked out the door to the courtyard. Manjula could hear the iron gate open and close, and knew he was headed out to drink as usual, not to return until dark.

She waited until she heard the gate latch, then took her mother’s hand. Limp, silent tears were trailing down her mother’s cheeks and neck, mingling with kerosene. But her rage seemed to have evaporated. Manjula guided her mother, light as a ghost, to the bathroom, and started the water.

“Stay here, Mommy,” Manjula whispered. “I will be back.”

She ran to her mother’s chest of drawers and pulled out a fresh nightgown, and went back to the bathroom. Her mother had closed the door, and Manjula listened anxiously outside, but she heard nothing but the usual rushes and splashes that might accompany a bath. Her sister was in the kitchen, sopping up kerosene with a rag. It was Sunday morning. Hira-ben would be here soon, and Kaki, to clean the house. Somebody would have to prepare lunch.

Manjula stood still. She closed her eyes and listened to her mother bathe, hardly daring to breathe.

The Protection

JUNE 2008

The days eased into a gentle pattern. Since the judge had granted Manjula custody after Gita's suicide note, a slow healing had begun. Rather than going home, Manjula slept every night in the hostel on Navsarjan's campus with Gita and the female police constable, who was there due to the ongoing media and political frenzy around the case. Gita still had nightmares, and Manjula would wake sometimes with Gita clinging to her, crying.

But mornings were better. Gingerly, Gita began to emerge from her cocoon. She had come to Navsarjan without any toiletries or essentials, so Manjula bought her a small brown suitcase as well as towels, soap, toothpaste and even some clothing. At meals, she fed her, holding small bits of chapati and dal to her mouth.

A fragile strength was building. In the afternoons, Manjula saw Gita walking through the frame of her window to the garden, or to the library. Gita spent the days drawing and reading, sometimes singing. Manjula watched the small figure wind her way through the campus, and felt her own heart healing as well.

SEPTEMBER 1991

Today, she would do it. Manjula had wanted to do it for years, but today she finally had the courage. Her mother was at the temple that morning, and it was just her and the servants in the house. Manjula had to get ready for school, but she lingered in the kitchen, absentmindedly turning a steel cup over and over in her hands, waiting for the moment.

Kaki, one of the Pradeep family's servants, was washing dishes in the outdoor sink in the backyard, and Manjula could see Hira-ben stooping with her short woven broom, moving rhythmically through the yard. Hira-ben had already finished cleaning the toilet, and the air smelled faintly of phenyl disinfectant. Hira-ben's iron basket was nearly full of garbage from the house, as well as dead leaves and bruised fruit from the mango and guava trees in the yard.

After a few moments, Hira-ben stood and stretched her back, adjusting the pale yellow sash of her sari across her chest. It was time.

"Baby, can I have some water please?" Hira-ben asked Manjula through the kitchen window. Her thin hand lifted the cup from the exterior windowsill, where Manjula's mother kept her water glass. Since she was a *valmiki*, or scavenger, Hira-ben's cup was kept separate from the rest of the family's dishes and utensils. Manjula's mother didn't even allow Hira-ben to touch the water buckets and dippers that the family used to bathe – Manjula, Anjana or Sanju had to move them before Hira-ben came in to clean the floors. Hira-ben was only to touch the toilet and yard waste. That morning, Manjula hadn't moved the bucket.

“Yes, one minute,” Manjula called out. Her pulse quickened as she poured from the water pitcher into the steel cup, spilling a little over the rim. She walked into the yard. The cool metal in her hand soothed her somewhat.

“Here, Hira-ben, take this.” Manjula held the cup to the older woman. Hira-ben’s eyes widened, and there was sudden silence in the yard as Kaki, mouth agape, stopped swirling dishes in the tub.

“What are you doing?” Kaki cried.

Manjula turned toward Kaki, eyes narrowed. Kaki quickly turned away, and stood silently, a plate in her hands. She didn’t say another word. Though she was an OBC, not a Dalit, Manjula knew Kaki feared her. Of course, since Manjula’s father forbade speaking of caste, Kaki didn’t know that the Pradeeps were Dalits, and a lower caste than her, but that was not of concern now.

“Hira-ben, take this,” Manjula said again, stepping closer to her.

Hira-ben shook her head vigorously and backed away slightly, her eyes flicking between the cup and Manjula’s face. Her left hand still gripped her chipped cup. Slowly this time, Manjula stepped toward her again and gently took it from her hand, setting it back on the windowsill. Hira-ben’s hands, slightly rough and papery, shook a little as Manjula wrapped her slim fingers around the steel. “Drink, Hira-ben.”

Raising the cup, Hira-ben drank slowly, her gaze never leaving Manjula’s. Manjula felt the breeze lift her hair off her neck slightly, and she thought recklessly what she would do next. She had already been out in the rural villages around Baroda once for her social work studies and angered the local village leaders by walking through the valmiki ghetto. When her program required her to go out into the field next, maybe she would take a meal with someone in the valmiki caste. Or maybe she would invite someone to take a meal in her own home. Having broken one taboo, all the rest seemed puny. Why had it taken so long to do this? She had known Hira-ben since she was a little girl. For more than 10 years, Hira-ben had been cleaning their toilets. Manjula knew that her mother gave leftover food to Hira-ben after all of the festivals. Her own old clothes, she knew, were worn by Hira-ben’s daughter. Why had she not yet addressed the discrimination in her own home?

Hira-ben lowered her gaze, breaking the spell that had cast over them both. Manjula thought she spied a small smile on her face as she handed her back the cup, but neither said anything. Wordlessly, Hira-ben hoisted her iron basket onto her hip and walked slowly out of the yard. Manjula strode to Kaki, who was still standing with her back to her.

“Kaki, wash this,” Manjula said.

Kaki looked at her with a mix of horror and fear. “I will not wash that,” she said forcefully. Manjula shrugged. Kaki’s defiance didn’t bother her as it might have. She carried the glass back into the family kitchen, and with Kaki’s gaze on her, washed the cup in the sink and put it back in the cupboard.

She was in the bath a few minutes later when her mother returned home. She heard Kaki's urgent voice telling her mother what she had done. Usually she dreaded her mother's anger, but today the fear rolled off of her like water. She dressed calmly and after gathering her books, walked into the kitchen where her mother was standing with the steel cup gingerly in her hand, fresh vermilion smudged on her forehead.

"What is this you have done, Goti?" her mother asked.

"Hira-ben wanted a drink of water," Manjula replied. She surprised even herself with the calm in her voice.

"You cannot do this in my house. This is not acceptable!" Her mother's voice began rising. "I do not have that kind of act in my house!"

"What kind of act, Ma?" Manjula said angrily, her own temper rising. "Do you really believe Hira-ben is impure? If this were my house I would do it. And I will do it again!"

"*Tu nahi sudhregi*, Manjula. *Tu nahi sudhregi*." Her mother glared at her.

Manjula considered her mother's words. *Tu nahi sudhregi*. You are too stubborn. You will not change. You have only your own ideas.

No, Manjula thought to herself. *I will not change*. Though her anger threatened to bubble over, she held her response in check. She looked evenly at her mother's face, the vermilion on her forehead and the disdain with which she held the steel cup that Manjula had so lovingly placed in Hira-ben's hands. *No, I will not change*. She turned, pointedly leaving behind the tiffin her mother had prepared for her lunch at school. She closed the door firmly behind her and started the short walk to the bus stop.

The Defense

JUNE 2008

Manjula pushed harder and harder for the appointment of Naina Bhatt as special prosecutor for Gita's case, writing letters to whomever she thought might be able to help. She only had a few weeks, and now that Gita was officially under the custody and care of Navsarjan Trust, she could focus on shaping the case. Under the Atrocities Act, the victim had the choice of prosecutor, who would be paid for by the state. But the state legal department had continually denied her request throughout June, appointing a man to the case instead. Manjula didn't think it was appropriate. And she didn't know him.

But Babu-bhai, Gita's father, preferred the lawyer the judge had appointed – someone the caste leaders had told him was a good choice.

Manjula knew better. Naina, for all her small stature, was a powerful woman. She was a Brahmin with long-standing experience as a lawyer and had handled important sexual violence cases. And although Gita had formed a bond of trust with Shaukat-bhai, Navsarjan's in-house attorney, Manjula thought she would benefit from having a senior woman lawyer as her public prosecutor.

Shaukat-bhai, of course, was always sensitive to Gita's moods and needs. He never spoke to her alone, but always made sure Manjula or another female was present. He had been with Navsarjan since the beginning, and Manjula thought fondly of the early days, when the two of them, just 20-something at the time, would follow Martin's guidance. Martin, the founder of Navsarjan, had recruited them both at the same time, for what he called the "spark in the eye and fire in the belly." Despite their different cultural and religious backgrounds, Manjula and Shaukat-bhai had been through the genocide together, and their worlds had changed. Nearly 20 years later, Manjula was now the executive director of Navsarjan and Shaukat-bhai was its lead attorney. Shaukat-bhai was Muslim, but devoted entirely to Navsarjan and its clients. Manjula smiled. They were together on that.

DECEMBER 1992

Her feet were drowning in ash and grit. Burnt ends of fabric dotted the twisted paths, slick with mud and oil and shit. Through the maze of the Muslim quarter in the old city, door after door sat ajar to reveal broken iron chairs and scraps of garbage. Walls were black. Ceilings were black. Windows were black, and broken. Manjula felt blackness creeping all around her.

More than a week had passed since the Hindu attacks on the Muslims had ended in Surat, but the fear was still palpable in the dark scars the fires had left on the walls of the homes. Manjula knew women had been raped, chased by men with fire. She closed her eyes to the blackness, instead listening to Martin's soft voice explaining the motivation for the violence against the Muslims. Amarjeet, the tidily-dressed Oxfam representative walking with them through the city to assess the damage, was murmuring in assent. Martin skipped from one subject to the next. L.K. Advani's grab for power in Gujarat and the rise of the BJP.¹⁵ The destruction of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, the

supposed birthplace of the Hindu god Ram. How Hindus in Gujarat, always a politically volatile state, had responded with violence to the local Muslim community. The vulnerability of the Muslims in Surat.

Involuntarily, her nostrils flared, burning at the lingering scent of kerosene. Manjula shuddered. She thought she could hear screams of children as they fled.



It didn't take very long to find them.

Just two kilometers outside of the city limits, the survivors of the riots were living in temporary settlements. Martin, Amarjeet and Manjula walked slowly through the makeshift huts, patched together with bamboo poles and thick grass, where the Muslim refugees had set up residence. A few goats bleated, pulling halfheartedly at the ropes that anchored them in place. Some women sat on small bundles, nursing babies. Others crouched together, wrapped tightly in thin cotton sheets against the December chill.

Martin approached a group of men squatting around a small kerosene fire. One, an older man smoking a slender *bidi*, looked up at him with weary eyes.

“Hello,” said Martin, lowering himself to his knees. “We have come here to help you.”



Eight months later, Manjula scanned the field in Surat City with a sense of amazement. Based on a survey that Navsarjan field workers had completed of 750 families affected by the attacks in December, the organization determined that the best way to help the Muslim community was to provide a way to earn money. So Navsarjan took the 500,000 rupees it received from Oxfam to buy vendor carts to help the victims of the riots get back on their feet financially. Many of the Muslims who suffered the brunt of the violence were hawkers or small merchants, Navsarjan had learned, and without supplies and transportation, had been entirely at the mercy of nongovernmental organizations like Oxfam or political parties, including the Congress Party.¹⁴

Martin had taken the lead on locating and designing the carts, which were being distributed today. Manjula marveled at her boss, who was now directing a truck driver into a spot on the field. Two giant semis, one filled with wooden frames and one with tires, were pulled onto a field where some 400 people were lined up, ready to receive the carts. He had quietly and methodically organized the entire effort, dispassionately evaluating the needs of the community and showing empathy without jumping to action.

And yet all around her, people were gleaming with joy. They could not have been more pleased with him if he had gone running into the flames to fight. *This is why I joined this organization*, she thought. *This man*. It wasn't the social work she had studied in college. She wasn't distributing medicines or clothing. She wasn't even working with Dalits. It wasn't what she expected when she started working at Navsarjan nearly a year ago – a lifetime ago. This, *this*, was to be her life, working

with marginalized communities, whether it be Dalit, Muslim, poor, tribal, female. Now she understood.

The fires had revealed pain and violence, and made thousands-year-old wounds raw again. But they had also revealed a shared humanity.

The Preparation

JULY 2008

The four of them sat huddled around a table, papers and newspaper clippings spread haphazardly across the surface. After a major media push by Manjula, the state court had finally appointed Naina. But the work of preparing Gita's testimony was progressing in fits and starts.

Naina took a controlled breath. "Gita. You have to be prepared for this, OK?"

Gita whimpered slightly. Manjula ached for her. But Naina was right. She had to be prepared.

"Gita, listen to me," Manjula said softly, taking her hand. "The defense attorneys are going to say terrible things. They are going to say dirty things, like you were enjoying the sex, or that you used the professors for your own pleasure. You have to be ready for that."

The girl cried out, and shoved the stack of papers closest to her off the table. "How could they say that? Why will they say such things?"

Shaukat-bhai, who was there to help Gita rehearse her testimony for court, slowly started picking up the papers. Naina's eyes softened, but when she spoke, her voice remained steady.

"It will be hard, Gita. That's why we have to keep practicing. Sometimes the court doesn't make sense. But you will learn, and that's the only way we can win."

Manjula gripped Gita's hand. It was cold. But after a moment Gita squeezed her back, and a little life seemed to perk into her. Manjula watched as she gathered herself, wiping away a tear and curling her loose hair behind her ear.

"OK, Naina-ben. I will try again."

NOVEMBER 1992

Martin handed her a thick textbook from the small bookshelf in his office. She rubbed the faded letters on the binding with her thumb. Medical Jurisprudence by T.K. Tope.

"This should help," he said. "Take it."

Manjula clutched the book gratefully. Maybe it would provide some answers. She had struggled the past few weeks trying to understand the terms that Martin and Dr. Bhise, head of forensic science at V.S. Hospital, were using as they discussed Mulji-bhai. He was a Dalit man who had been abused in police custody in the village of Dhanduka and then died after his release. His mother, Vali-ben, had come to Navsarjan for legal help, and as her case against the police ramped up Manjula felt increasingly confused. All fall she had been helping Martin, who already had his law

degree, with research for the case, but trying to analyze the post-mortem report the past few days had proven nearly impossible.

Manjula, now armed with this forensic encyclopedia, turned to her task with renewed vigor. She laid the textbook down next to the report and settled in to read. Alien words jumped off the page. Contusion. Hematoma. Ligature marks. She looked up term after term in the textbook, slowly absorbing this new language. It wasn't just the language of forensics. The post-mortem was written in Gujarati, a tongue she only felt mildly comfortable in. Despite living her whole life in Gujarat, her family, originally from North India, spoke Hindi at home, and her schooling, all the way through her master's degree, was conducted in English.

She sighed. Everything about this case, her first as an employee of Navsarjan and the first the organization had ever filed against the police, was proving trying. Nothing was clear-cut. In August, Mulji-bhai had been falsely accused of stealing a bicycle and had been beaten by the police before being released. The following morning, his body was found hanging in the hut where he lived with Vali-ben, a widow, and his younger brother. The police claimed to have nothing to do with his death. Vali-ben, however, wasn't convinced that her son hadn't been murdered. And based on an inconclusive post-mortem report and pictures of Mulji-bhai's body, it looked like murder. Somebody may have staged the crime scene to make it look like suicide. And even if he had committed suicide, Navsarjan suspected that the police were still responsible for abetting his death – a crime that could give the two accused officers 10 years in jail. Never mind that the police themselves would have to investigate their own officers, which was unlikely.

Manjula believed the evidence was tied up in the post-mortem report, which was, for the moment, mostly indecipherable. She felt unprepared for the struggle ahead. Still, Manjula thrilled to the challenge of the lawsuit – and of working against the police. If she could just understand the forensics, and the legal implications of different kinds of marks on the body, or even how to guide the investigation and what Vali-ben's legal rights were, maybe she could be more effective. She leaned back in her seat and stared up at the ceiling, trying to remember Martin's mantra. Power comes from knowledge. We can take power from the law. We use legal means to get justice.

But I need to know the law in order to have any power, she thought ruefully. *So much for that social work degree. A law degree is what I need.* The thought of Vali-ben broke her reverie. The old woman had been offered 500,000 rupees from the police to drop the suit, but had refused, despite the fact that the sole wage-earner in her family was now gone. Manjula had never encountered such strength before, especially in a woman, and deeply admired the old widow's will in face of the near impossible obstacle. Vali-ben's reedy voice echoed through Manjula's head.

“Mane Paisa Nahī Nyay Jōiye.”

“I don't want money. I want justice.”

Manjula straightened her back, and bent her head back toward the book.

The Trial

JULY 2008

Manjula held Gita's hand as they walked the narrow path to the courtroom. It was the first day of the trial. Crowds and cameras pressed in on them, squeezing the air from the street. The July heat baked her nerves and the tension in the crowd simmered. The growing tide of murmurs blissfully blotted out any specific slurs toward Gita, but Manjula thought she could hear the shouts of the families of the accused, who were all outside the courtroom claiming the innocence of the six jailed professors.

Gita stiffened, but she adjusted her white veil over her head and walked through the crowd without slowing. She hadn't allowed anyone to take pictures of her throughout her entire ordeal, and Manjula admired this spark of courage. She herself was so soaked with adrenaline that she thought she might burst from her skin.

They made it to the entrance to the building. Naina and Shaukat-bhai were standing in the front of the court, waiting for their arrival. Two chairs sat empty in the front of the room. The doors shut behind them, wiping out the clamoring crowd.

Gita took a deep breath. Manjula followed suit. The two walked into the courtroom to take a seat.

JUNE 2001

The walk from the John Knox hotel to the Palais des Nations was quiet and green, but Manjula's heart ricocheted through her chest. She wondered if Paul and Jyothi, other delegates from the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR), could hear its beating as they walked alongside her. It wouldn't surprise her if all of Switzerland could hear it.

She still couldn't believe she was in Geneva on this perfect June day. At 32 years old she was one of the youngest members of the NCDHR, and this was her first time representing Dalit issues at the United Nations. The delegation's task was a big one – it was pushing to have caste-based discrimination added to the agenda for the U.N. World Conference Against Racism, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, coming up later in the year in Durban, South Africa. The Geneva gathering was the last planning meeting before Durban, and NCDHR's last opportunity to push for a commitment to discuss caste at the world conference. They had plans to meet with diplomats from countries as far and wide as Guatemala and the Netherlands, as well as participate in the women and youth caucus events during the convention.

And she was here, representing not just Navsarjan, but India! She smiled quietly to herself, pride mixing with nerves. As they neared the complex, Paul and Jyothi's voices hushed. Manjula was taken aback by what she saw – a chair, a giant chair, gleaming in the morning light.¹⁵

It soared over the avenue of flags leading to the Palais, a chair as big as a building, balancing on three legs. The fourth was broken. Its darkened edges stopped halfway short of reaching the ground, cutting a jagged profile into the air. A crowd of well-dressed visitors lingered around the chair, and as the three approached it Manjula became increasingly aware of her light green salwar kameez amid all of the dark business suits and briefcases. She adjusted her scarf.

“What is this chair, Jyothi?” Manjula whispered to her colleague. Jyothi was an established Dalit leader and had attended United Nations events many times – certainly she knew. Just a few days away from home and Manjula was already conscious of how much she had to learn. She had never even heard of some of the U.N. conventions, much less read the myriad papers and reports on the U.N. website that people were referencing. Manjula had never been uncertain about her English before, but she felt self-conscious here, and swore to study more. But Jyothi, wide-eyed, shook her head. They both leaned back on their heels slightly, looking up at the chair, which stood proudly facing the world’s flags. Some of the same giddy awe Manjula felt when she looked out the window on the flight to Switzerland and saw the Alps, stark in the distance, tickled her scalp. She felt very small, and very human.

The chair stands outside in the wind and storms, Manjula thought. It looked right at the United Nations. Who could sit there? It was only for giants. And it was broken.

Broken. A torrent blending pain and anger and oddly, a sense of shared dignity, swept over her. Dalits were broken people, too. But Ambedkar had taken charge of the Hindi word, had said that the supposedly broken people at the bottom of the caste system could stand on their own. Navsarjan was trying to take the very idea of brokenness and imbue it with power and solidarity instead. Dalit doesn’t mean broken, Manjula repeated to herself, staring up at the sharp edges of the chair above her. Dalit means strong. Broken doesn’t have to mean broken forever. Broken can heal.

“Come, Manjula,” Paul said, touching her elbow. “Let us go.”

The Verdict

MARCH 2009

A thousand people packed the ground outside of the courthouse. The testimonies of students, professors, police and Gita had been heard. Hundreds of articles had been written. The case had consumed Gujarat and hijacked its media. The standoff between Navsarjan and the BJP and caste leaders was to end today. After months and months of hearings, it was finally happening. The verdict on the six teachers accused of rape would be handed down.

Manjula stood outside with the crowds, gripping her mobile phone. As the trial had grown increasingly more heated, the judge had closed the courtroom and she hadn't been inside since the very first day of the trial. She was outside with the rest of the throngs, waiting for Shaukat-bhai to call her with the news. The crowd rumbled at her presence.

“You! Manjula Pradeep! You did this to us!” shouted one of the wives of the accused.

“You committed a crime by bringing this case on them!” shouted another family member.

She could hardly hear their slurs. Who cared? It was almost time. This was the most historic case of her career, in all of Navsarjan. This case represented an intersection of caste, gender and politics. It was about both legal aid and emotional support. Most importantly, it was about Gita.

Her phone suddenly vibrated, then squealed in her hand. Her body went electric.

“Shaukat-bhai! What is it?”

“Guilty! They are all guilty!” Shaukat-bhai's typical composure was gone. “Guilty! Every single one!”

Manjula nearly dropped her phone. She was elated. She floated above the crowd, looking back at their stormy faces, untouched. *This is one of the best days of my life*, she whispered to herself. *We have challenged the state and won. Gita has gotten justice. We have saved more girls. We won.* The victory surged through her, burning a path of righteousness through the difficulty of the past year. *We won.*

JUNE 1997

The headline leapt from the front page of the *Indian Express*.

JUNE 7, 1997

BONDED LABORERS IN THE BACKYARD OF BARODA CITY

Manjula knew the story was coming. She'd spent days with Darshan Desai, the reporter, showing him the villages around Padra where she'd trained 40 women community leaders and helped organize a union of Dalit and tribal women *majoors* and *chakars*. These agricultural workers

and bonded laborers subsisted on a few rupees¹⁶ a day, lived in perpetual debt to the landlords whose fields they worked and were often subject to physical and sexual violence as well. The union, Vadodara Khet Majoor Sangathan, which recruited members from all over Padra, hoped to eradicate some of these injustices. It was hosting its first major event today, and with Navsarjan's aid, was going to march through Padra and petition the block magistrate, the local government official responsible for ensuring labor equality, for minimum wages and better living conditions. The rally's location in Padra, just 16 kilometers from Baroda City, was going to rip the lid off the fantasy that there was no bonded labor in Baroda, one of the most developed regions in the entire state of Gujarat. She knew it would create some backlash from the landlords and perhaps the block leaders, at the very least.

But the front page of the paper! Manjula felt a hot stir of excitement in her belly and tossed the paper onto the living room chair for her father to read later. Today, she was raising a fist both to the government establishment and, in some ways, to Navsarjan, which had never before focused on building women leaders. She was expecting nearly a thousand women at the rally, only the second rally in Navsarjan's history. *This is my chance*, she thought. *Today is the day*.

"Ma, are you ready? The jeep is here." Manjula glanced at her mother, who was adjusting a light orange sari. She still couldn't believe her mother wanted to attend the rally. In the five years Manjula had been working with Navsarjan, her mother hadn't expressed much interest in her work, except to be skeptical of her devotion to Dalit rights and worry about her safety. She rarely left the house, and never attended political rallies. But here she was, pinning a small green Vadodara Khet Majoor Sangathan button to her sari. Manjula's heart surged with affection.

"Ready, Goti," she replied. The two headed out to meet their driver. Even this early, the typical June heat was building and Manjula felt a small trickle of sweat tickle the back of her neck. As the jeep made its way to Padra, Manjula kept her gaze on her mother, who was looking quietly out the window, hands folded in her lap.

"Ma, you know these will be village women," Manjula said. "Laborers. They'll be different from other women you know. It might be difficult."

"*Haa*, yes, I know," her mother said, without turning to the window.

"Are you sure you want to walk with them? It will be very hot. You can stay in the jeep or in my office."

"No, Goti, I will walk," she said.

Perhaps her own fire was building, Manjula thought. She knew her mother had been leaving the house more and standing up to Daddy more frequently, especially now that Manjula helped support her financially, giving her some freedom. Maybe her mother would finally understand her work. She thrilled at the thought.

But as they neared Padra, anxiety began to temper her excitement. She knew the landlords were trying to quash the rally by bribing the private drivers that usually transported workers back

and forth to Padra. Public transportation was rare at best. What if nobody made it? She was hoping for women from more than 40 villages to be present.

The worry dissipated somewhat when they arrived at the field on the outskirts of town where everyone was supposed to meet. It was 9 a.m., and a few hundred women were already gathered. The women sat shielding their faces against the brutal sun, some on a small sheet on the grass, others on the mud. Pravin, Vinu and Hansa, colleagues from Navsarjan, were distributing the rectangular union pins, and the green Vadodara Khet Majoor Sangathan banner – depicting a man and ox pulling a cart and a woman carrying fodder – was rolled neatly and waiting on a patch of grass for the rally to start. Big metal cans of water and a stack of plastic cups sat in the corner of the fenced field. Manjula smiled as she spotted the two Kashi-bens, the leaders of the rally. Could there be braver women?

Kashi-ben from the village of Mahuvad was a slight, dark woman of few words. Manjula knew her poverty was extreme. She had visited her mud house and met her disabled husband and lazy son. Kashi-ben from Mahuvad was the only wage-earning member of her family, and only making 15 rupees a day at that. Kashi-ben from the village of Sadhi was a more aggressive, vocal force. A tall, distinguished woman, she exuded power. Despite her alcoholic husband, Kashi-ben from Sadhi was a little better off, and her house was semi-*pakha*, partly plaster. She was attuned to everything happening in Sadhi.

These two grandmothers, who had met in Navsarjan's training program, formed the core of the union. Manjula watched them greet the new arrivals with pride. As each busload arrived, the Kashi-bens distributed the yellow placards identifying each village represented. The field filled, buzzing louder and louder.

By 11:30, nearly 1,500 women, mostly Dalits, but also some tribals and OBCs, had crowded in. The gathering exceeded even her most optimistic hopes. Manjula could see the awe and a bit of envy in the eyes of her co-workers, and, she noticed, her mother. The fire in Manjula's belly was coursing as hot as the sun, and as she took the microphone to address the crowd, she felt the energy rush through her and explode over the field.

“Workers, laborers, women of Vadodara! For all of you who want to stand for justice and equal rights under the law, let us walk now. We will gather behind our leaders Kashi-ben from Mahuvad and Kashi-ben from Sadhi and march to the block magistrate and present him with our demands!”

Following two by two behind the Kashi-bens, who carried the green banner between them, the 1,500 women, with a few men, marched out from the field. Manjula fell in step behind the Kashi-bens. The mass of bodies and voices streamed down the state highway, heat and volume building. Manjula rode the wave, and forgot everything, her pride in her work, her sore feet, even her mother. Sweat poured down her face, soaking her salwar kameez, and she wiped the moisture from her skin, chanting slogans alongside her compatriots.

“*Kaamna Kallak Nakki Karo!*”
 “*Atyachar Baudh Karo!*”
 “*Laghutam Vetan Laiyne Rabishu!*”
 “*Bhrashtrachar Bandh Karo!*”

“Set a limit to our work!”
 “Stop violence!”
 “We will ensure our minimum wages!”
 “End corruption!”

Cars and buses slowed in their lanes, and Manjula glimpsed noses and eyes pressed against windows, some mocking, some disbelieving. Vendors stared out over their piles of tomato and mango. Shopkeepers came out to stand in their doorways to watch, faces impassive.

The unresponsiveness of the town further fueled the passion of the protestors. After nearly an hour, the procession neared the municipal office, where the block labor officer worked. A fever caught the women, and Manjula alongside them. Their shouts grew louder and hoarser. Before Manjula knew what was happening, the Kashi-bens were leading a group of 20 women up to the second floor of the small municipal building, charging up the stairs as the rest of the crowd cheered and chanted from the street. Just above the din of the street, Manjula heard the Kashi-bens shouting at the labor officer through the windows, the sharp voice of Kashi-ben from Sadhi, the higher, bird-like voice of Kashi-ben from Mahuvad. She marveled at the power of these women, and felt her own skin prickle. *Look at what we can do.*

A few minutes later, the group descended, crowing their victory over the labor officer. “He was so afraid of us, he locked himself in his office,” laughed Kashi-ben from Sadhi. “We will have our rights!”

“Let us go and petition the block magistrate!” shouted Manjula to the crowd. “It is time!” Taking the lead of the march for the first time, Manjula felt power pierce through her feet with each step. *We will get justice.*

The magistrate, Mr. Damor, a nice tribal man, was waiting for them. Manjula and Kashi-ben from Mahuvad together handed him the 15-page memorandum detailing the women’s issues and their demands. Manjula saw his hands take the document from hers with an otherworldly sensation, as if she were watching from above. More than a thousand signatures, all in support of justice. It hardly seemed possible, yet here it was, the culmination of two years of work organizing women, going from village to village, trying to fight the marginalization of women while, as the only woman at Navsarjan, facing marginalization in her own organization. She had done it, she and these other brave women.

Manjula floated down to the street and faced the masses. She felt free, as if along with the sweat she’d shed she had let go of her own burden of doubt. She had thought she could lead – now she knew. Power was light. She saw her mother’s orange sari in the crowd, and for the first time since the march began, Manjula saw her mother’s smile. She smiled in return before closing the rally.

“*Jai Bhim!*” Manjula cried hoarsely, giving honor to Ambedkar, as Navsarjan did at every gathering. His name alone was a call for justice for Dalits, and stood, she thought, for the very idea of being human. She felt thousands of eyes on her, and drew from them to cry out again, channeling all her fire into the words.

“Jai Bhim! Jai Bhim!”

“Hail Bhim! Hail Bhim!”

The Sweets

MARCH 2009

The drive to Jetalvasna, where Gita had returned to live with her parents after the trial started, swept by as though Manjula were living in a dream. She saw the faces of the six accused men, incredulous with their vermilion smudges on their foreheads, their smiles nearly frozen as they received the unexpected determination of their guilt. Judge Saxena's words echoed in her head.

Guilty. Life imprisonment. 10,000 rupees apiece to the victim. Guilty. Life imprisonment. 10,000 rupees apiece to the victim. Guilty. Life imprisonment. 10,000 rupees apiece to the victim.

Gita hadn't wanted to be there for the verdict, nervous the men might be found innocent, so Manjula had called her from the courtroom. But speaking to her wasn't enough. Even as she hung up the phone, Manjula was already on her way to Gita's home. It was time to celebrate. She had Bhailal-bhai stop and pick up a box of white *barfi* along the way, one of Gita's favorite sweets.

But when Manjula arrived at Gita's home, she found the girl prone on a bed in the living room, watching the news.

"Gita?" She sat down softly. "Aren't you happy?"

Her eyes flickered toward Manjula.

"Gita, what is the matter?"

"Everybody knows," she whispered, barely audible. Manjula bent closer to listen. "Everybody knows I was raped. Everybody thinks I am a victim."

Manjula stroked the young girl's hair. "Yes baby, they may think so. But you can be proud of yourself that you've played an important role in justice. Because of you lives have been saved, maybe other girls were kept from being raped. It's a big day for all of us. It's a historic day."

Gita smiled slowly, and Manjula gently took her elbow to pull her to a seated position. Without saying a word, she opened her box of sweets and selected a perfect diamond *barfi*. As Gita parted her lips, Manjula placed the sweet in her mouth. Manjula savored it as if it were her own.

MARCH 1983

The colors were everywhere, colors and sweetness, an oblivion of stimulation. For once, Manjula joined in, and her hesitation seemed to melt into the screaming yellows on the street, the indigo smeared on her face and the sweet *barfi* she had just eaten, coconut still lingering on her tongue. Wherever she turned people were standing with plastic squirt bottles of paint, while others were spilling colored powder from their pockets. On the streets were broken plastic bags filled with remnants of vermilion, indigo and snow white. Children painted like zebras of green and purple

racing across a savannah of cows and auto rickshaws splashed in yellow and magenta, grown men and women screeching and laughing like babies, all on the hunt for barfi, *gujiya*, *laddoo* and *gulab jamun*, the traditional sweets of Holi.

Holi. It had something to do with protecting her brothers, Manjula thought, remembering her mother's words. She wasn't sure. She'd always resisted the Hindu tales – she just found them unrealistic. There was that myth of Prahlad, about how his aunt sacrificed herself to save his life. Her mother had made the necklace of laddoo and sweet dates last night and laid it across her younger brother's neck after blessing it, an amulet of sweets. Or maybe Holi signaled the beginning of harvest. Maybe it was simply a festival of ecstasy, to bring Hindus together.

Who knew. Today, she wasn't going to think about it, not about the meaning of Holi or her habitual fear of being touched or even her hatred of being dirty. Today, Manjula skipped with her friend Preeti down the street, her curls dusted persimmon orange, taking the pink and yellow powders her mother had prepared and tossing them like seeds onto the neighbors around her. Green and blue streaked across her pants, and her fingers were an otherworldly hue. She slowed only to stop at a neighbor's house for laddoo, the sweet yellow chickpea biscuit that looked like the sun. Today Manjula was not a fearful adolescent girl, today she was brightness and taste. Free.

Was this how it felt for everyone? Was this how her mother felt in *puja*, when she fell into that reverie? Manjula could recognize devotion, but she had never felt it. She paused for a moment to watch her neighbor Mrs. Negi press her finger into the forehead of a small child who had run up behind them. He grinned happily as he grabbed a barfi from her plate and scampered away, freshly christened with a pink thumbprint. But before Manjula could stop to think, Preeti slipped her hand through hers and pulled her back into the savannah, and Manjula found herself in the swirl of colors, laughing in spite of herself.

Epilogue

DECEMBER 2009

Gita ran out of her home with a smile, catching Manjula with a hug in the courtyard. She beamed up at her, then let go.

“Manjula-ben, I am so happy you are here! It’s been so long!”

Manjula smiled and turned. “Gita, meet Juliet. She is an artist from the U.S. and she is in India visiting Navsarjan. Her son helped us with some reports last year and she wanted to meet you after hearing about the case.”

“Gita, so lovely to meet you,” Juliet smiled warmly. “Manjula has told me so much about you.”

Gita took Juliet’s hand. “Come in, Juliet, let’s all go inside.”

Babu-bhai was sitting inside the living room, and he rose to greet them. “Manjula-ben, it’s been too long. Sit down, sit down. Let’s have some tea.”

“No Papa, I want to show Manjula-ben my new room!” cried Gita. She bubbled with childish excitement, taking both Manjula and Juliet’s hands again. Juliet giggled, and so did Manjula. The girl’s excitement was contagious. They let her pull them upstairs to her bedroom, where light spilled in from the balcony door. Pictures lined the walls. An image of a village. One of a goddess. A few books stacked on a shelf. In the corner, the small chocolate brown suitcase Manjula had given her sat next to a harmonium and dhol drum. Manjula sat in a chair, her feet tucked into a slice of sunlight. Despite the December chill, she was warm.

“Look, Manjula-ben, my harmonium. Have you ever heard me play?” Gita sat down on her bed and pulled the instrument onto her lap, strumming lightly.

Babu-bhai, who had followed them in, broke into a smile. “Gita, if you are going to play, then so should I.” He sat down as well, pulling the drum in between his legs. They fell into an easy rhythm, with Gita’s treble laughter accompanying them. Suddenly Juliet began swaying and dipping, laughing as well.

“I can’t help it, I have to dance!” she exclaimed.

Manjula sat in her seat, watching the dancing woman, and the laughing girl, clapping her hands softly. The smile on her face felt unetched, as if it too could float around the room, streaming into the future on a crescendo of warmth, and movement, and love.

A CONVERSATION WITH MANJULA PRADEEP

The following is an edited compilation of select interviews conducted by Amy S. Choi between Sept. 16 and Nov. 4, 2011, and an interview by IPJ Program Officer Jennifer Freeman on Oct. 11, 2011.

Q: You were born into a 3,000-year-old caste system. I learned that it has an estimated 4,000 castes and subcastes, with 752 subcastes of Dalits or Untouchables. Where did this term come from? Who does it apply to?

A: The term “Untouchable” was coined by people who believe they are forward castes, or the most pure people on earth. Before India attained freedom, there were many forms of labor that only people from my community were supposed to do. For me, being involved in this caste means my forefathers and my relatives are relegated to skinning dead animals. They collect dead animals, cut them, remove the skin, and that skin is sold to make shoes and leather bags and the flesh is eaten. It is still happening. As per the last census in 2001, we have 164 million Untouchables in the country.

Q: How did your caste affect you in everyday life?

A: My family had always tried to avoid the issue of caste and pretend that we were not Dalit, but people knew. Dominant caste teachers in school would tease me because of my surname, which my father selected because he was trying to hide our caste. Children would call me “ABC,” referring to “BC,” or “Backwards Caste.” Everybody in Indian society is focused on caste and where you are in the hierarchy. In some ways, I did benefit from the reservation system and received scholarships for school because I am a Dalit.

Q: Wasn’t untouchability outlawed?

A: Yes, untouchability was outlawed in the 1950 constitution of India. The constitution was written by a very well-known national leader, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Under article 17-6, untouchability is abolished and whoever practices untouchability will be penalized and punished. But are people following the constitution? That’s the question for everybody in India. Last year Navsarjan did a study on untouchability in 1,589 villages – that study identified 98 forms of untouchability in Gujarat, my home state. Two things stood out: no inter-dining and no inter-marriage between castes. Out of 98,000 people that we interviewed, 99 percent believed there should be no inter-caste marriage.

Q: You have been with Navsarjan for the past 20 years and were its first female employee. What has kept you committed to this organization and how have your friends and family reacted?

A: I have always been seen in my family as a rebel. I was just 21 when I joined this organization. We were just a small group then; we didn’t have money, resources or an office. Not many people from professional backgrounds would like to go into the villages and work. It was difficult for me to make the choice, because I would be identified very openly as a Dalit and my family was very uncomfortable with that. We had always tried to hide our caste. But after working in the villages and experiencing the struggles of my community, I became very committed. I wanted to work and do

something where I could grow but also help. Working within the community makes you more human. They make you realize that you may have a degree, but they have knowledge.

Q: And you recognized that you needed more knowledge, for example legal knowledge.

A: The Prohibition of Atrocities Act was passed in 1989. When I joined Navsarjan in 1992, we realized that Gujarat had passed the law but it wasn't being implemented. As we were taking on the rights of Dalits, understanding the law was a tool of empowerment. The first program of Navsarjan was legal aid work to help survivors of violence and discrimination fight for justice. We work through a lot of fear, because the caste system makes people internalize their fear. Sometimes people won't speak, so we have to see their eyes and expressions. A lot of our work goes initially into listening and caring and observing, but keeping our mouths shut. We spend a lot of time in the villages until people begin to trust us. You have to give them time.

*“Working within the community makes you more human.
They make you realize that you may have a degree, but they have knowledge.”*

Q: You also quickly became a leader within the organization.

A: I became a leader but it was not so easy. Establishing yourself as a leader is much more difficult because as a woman, your gender is put against you. Will she be able to take risks? Will she be able to protect us? Will she work for us or will she get married? You have to have a very hard skin. I established myself in 1995 when I went into a new area and established a field area by myself. I had a lot of resistance from within the organization and also by men in the villages, but I got so much energy and hope from the people, especially those who need you and want your help. I was not at all bothered or concerned about who was talking about me. My concern was to do something where I could change the lives of the people.

Q: How have you helped other women rise to leadership positions?

A: I was the first female employee of Navsarjan. Our office was full of men. In the field, it was the same – I would never see a woman in our meetings in the villages. I wanted to create spaces for women. In 2000 I became program director for women's rights within Navsarjan. My first goal was to push for equal representation of women within the organization so that we could show the community that women were leading. We identified 40 women to participate in a training program and become leaders within our organization. We picked women who had fire in their belly and a spark in their eyes. We didn't look for qualifications like degrees. Men were not always happy with me because I was making these women strong. Dalit men can also be sexist. But the organization became gender-sensitive slowly. As executive director, I have also partnered with women's networks such as Women in Governance, to build and strengthen women's leadership and representation throughout India.

Q: Where do you think Dalit rights fit into the larger women’s movement in India?

A: The women’s movement in India is very much led by the elite caste women. The women’s movement couldn’t see how caste and gender influence each other, but you cannot separate caste and gender in India. If you want to talk about violence against women, you also have to see through the lens of the community of women that is oppressed the most. So it was a challenge for me in creating space within the women’s movement and creating a bridge between the two movements. I have been able to build an alliance between different women’s rights organizations and Navsarjan in Gujarat, but at the national level it’s still a question. If you talk about women’s issues as one issue, you are not addressing the root cause, but only looking at the wound. The root causes are patriarchy and the caste system. I see these as very much entwined. In my state we have women from warrior communities who cannot leave their homes. Who will help them? The alliance with women across caste is very important. Each of us is suffering from gender discrimination and we also have to see how caste manipulates gender. Many people have the wrong impression of Dalit women that we are weak and vulnerable, and don’t have knowledge, skills or personalities. That’s what we want to change.

“... you cannot separate caste and gender in India. If you want to talk about violence against women, you also have to see through the lens of the community of women that is oppressed the most.”

Q: Gujarat, your home state, has seen severe religious violence. How has that affected your work?

A: In 2002 we had the communal genocide, which was targeted toward the Muslims and involved not just caste and gender but religion. India is 81 percent Hindu, so religion plays a very dominant role. Gujarat is controlled by the Hindu right-wing party, the BJP, which instigated the acts that led to the genocide. In my own work, whenever you are challenging the system the system puts more pressure on. Since 2002 many human rights organizations have stopped working in Gujarat; there are very few of us like Navsarjan because of the pressure from the political leaders.

Q: How has the economy in Gujarat affected your work?

A: Gujarat is one of the most developed states in India, but it is also one of the top five states in the country when it comes to human rights violations. We have one of the lowest gender ratios in Gujarat. Violence against Dalits in Gujarat stands fourth in the country. Due to the liberalization of the economy, there is a lot of division happening in my state. We are filing petitions in the high court against corporations because much of the land that is being taken away by the corporate sector is from the Dalit and poor communities. We have had some success. The government also still employs Dalits as manual scavengers. So on one hand Gujarat is economically progressive and developed, but on the other hand you have this. The government does not have the courage to stop this problem. The dominant caste, with a caste mindset, is ashamed and they believe that people like

me are shaming them, and they feel threatened by us. But we are challenging the system, not the person who is questioning us.

Q: How do you address the issues facing valmikis, the scavenger caste at the bottom of the traditional caste hierarchy?

A: We are pushing the state over implementation of laws to ensure the practice of manual scavenging is abolished. We also want to ensure that valmiki children and other Dalit youth are getting educated. We have three boarding schools for Dalit children, including valmikis, and then we have also set up a vocational training center to help youth break out of caste-based occupations. We have trained more than 5,000 Dalit youth. This is an issue not just for civil society organizations, but the state. At some level I am also frustrated with the orientation of the Dalit community, which can also believe they are born into a particular caste because they have committed sins in the past. So we put our hope in the youth and young children.

Q: Tell us more about the boarding schools.

A: The schools are called Navsarjan Vidhyalaya, which means “school” in Gujarati. They are in Sami, Rayka and Katariya, areas considered to be “backwards” regions in Gujarat with low education levels and barren lands. The students are from fifth to eighth grade and are all Dalit from different subcastes. Many of their parents are migrant workers. Parents pay partial fees and we subsidize the rest through a grant from Asha for Education, a fund based in the United States. The curriculum is based on the government curriculum, but the way we teach is different. Teachers give a scientific approach to many subjects, especially when we talk about religion and languages, because as Dalit children, it is important that they have a rational understanding of Hindu mythology and do not internalize the caste system.

We also talk to them about human rights, the constitution and Ambedkar. And we discuss gender equality. Boys learn how to make chapati and have to help in the kitchen. Everything on campus is managed by the children, including taking care of chores. We have ecologically sound systems, which use waste from the toilets to fertilize the gardens, where the children grow plants and vegetables. A lot of what we teach on campus are also life skills, such as proper hygiene and diet. We bring them up to the appropriate grade level in their skills. More than 50 percent of our students who enter in fifth grade do not know how to read and write.

Q: You mentioned how many fewer boys are born than girls. Is that across all castes? Are boys still more desirable in India, and what impact does that have?

A: In India women are not treated equally at all, we know that. Among dominant castes, such as the warriors or the Patels, there are still very low gender ratios. The highest gender ratio, where there is almost equal birth rate between boys and girls, is within the Muslims and Christians. There is more gender disparity in the higher levels of the subcastes of Dalits than among the lowest subcastes. And in tribals the birth rate is almost equal.

Q: How do you involve the international community in Dalit human rights issues?

A: I have been associated with the international movement since 2001, which is when we set up the International Dalit Solidarity Network. We have networks in different countries, including in the United Kingdom, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, Denmark and various other countries. We also pushed for inclusion of caste issues in the conversation at the U.N. World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in Durban, South Africa. I have addressed the United Nations and the European Parliament. Every year we spend our energy not just at the grassroots level but also at the international level. The Dalit rights movement is one of the strongest movements in the world now. In November we will have an international convention on eliminating caste-based discrimination in Nepal and discuss good practices. We have also set up a Dalit foundation to help small groups in the country work on this issue independently.

Q: How has the United States been able to help in pushing your work forward?

A: In the early 2000s, Edward Kennedy was able to pass a bill in the U.S. Senate looking at U.S. policies in India, ensuring that the World Bank would not fund India for water and sanitation if manual scavenging is not eradicated by the government. We are trying to set up a Dalit solidarity platform in the United States, which we hope will support our work against human rights injustices. We have a lot of individuals, students and friends who work with us as well. But we still need lots of international support, not only from United States but globally – because we believe untouchability is the oldest human form of discrimination in the world.

*“... we believe untouchability is the oldest form of
discrimination in the world.”*

Q: Do caste biases exist within Navsarjan and among its clients, and if so, how do you address them?

A: Sometimes the people who come to us are from dominant castes and are suffering from either gender-based or labor-based injustices. Before we give them our support, we require that they share water or tea with us, which helps break down the caste barrier. This is something that Martin taught us from the very beginning, when we were very young. We have turned away some people because they refuse to share tea with us, although I do think that we need to be patient with people and help them understand why they need to break those taboos. We have a variety of training and team building exercises that we do with people new to the organization. We also see biases among the Dalit children in our boarding schools. They do not want to relate with different subcastes that they see as lower than themselves. Teachers play an important role in breaking down those barriers.

Q: A lot of your work involves building bridges between different marginalized groups. How do you do that?

A: The first thing is organizing meetings where different groups – such as tribals and Dalits, or Muslims and Dalits – are having tea and water in each of their houses. Working with young people is also important, because they are more flexible than adults. The youth have less fear and less

bitterness, and then they are able to bring their parents on board. Both before and after the communal violence in Gujarat, we supported the Muslim heads of village councils. We also have lawyers from Muslim communities in our organization.

Q: Did the communal violence affect the work of Navsarjan?

A: Our identity changed. We were previously seen as a Dalit rights organization, but after 2002 we became more of a human rights organization. We support the rights of the poor and marginalized, and that includes Muslims and Dalits. We also tried to change the definition of “Dalit.” We don’t want Dalit to mean oppressed or broken; we want the word to stand for people who believe in and practice equality. This way everybody, including Muslims and tribals, can be part of the Dalit movement.

Q: Can dominant castes be part of the Dalit movement?

A: Yes! Anybody who practices equality is part of the Dalit movement. They are also Dalits.

“We don’t want Dalit to mean oppressed or broken; we want the word to stand for people who believe in and practice equality.”

Q: How do you persuade non-Dalits to become part of the movement?

A: It starts with women. I spend a lot of my time building alliances among women across caste, starting women’s rights councils and bringing in high-caste women, who suffer as well. Some people, even within the Dalit movement, believe that only Dalits should work on Dalit issues. But we believe that anyone who believes in this ideology of equality should be part of it so we have a bigger support network. And that means including Brahmins and other dominant castes in our work.

Q: Did you always think that way?

A: No. It was a learning process and I had to learn through patience. My understanding of inclusion came when I started meeting more people at the national and international level, meeting people across different castes, communities and religions. Whether someone is a dominant caste or so-called Untouchable, we all have our prejudices and perceptions. That’s why it’s so important to always talk about caste. If you talk superficially nothing happens, but as you build relationships and become friends you can see change.

Q: What was the first thing you did when you became the executive director of Navsarjan?

A: The first step was to decentralize the organization. I wanted to decentralize and give more power to the local teams. I started identifying people who had the capabilities to become second-line

leaders. I set up a committee against sexual harassment and framed an anti-sexual harassment policy, and I asked each and every staff member to sign the written agreement that they would follow the rules of the organization. Women became coordinators of field offices. I also helped to ensure transparency in the organization.

Q: What are your hopes for Navsarjan going forward?

A: My dream is to see more and more leadership coming up from the grassroots level. I'm happy with the work building leadership within the organization, but I'm not happy with the work in the community. The gender inequality still hasn't been completely addressed. Gender inequality within caste is such a delicate issue, so whoever takes over for me has to have a very strong belief in it. I have tried to do my best to build up the organization and the movement after taking on the responsibility as director from the founder.

Q: What are your plans for the future?

A: My passion is building leadership, so I want to focus on helping and mentoring women leaders across India, as well as women in Nepal, Pakistan and Bangladesh. There are a lot of opportunities for me and many offers to join other organizations, but I'm holding that off. I believe that the organization has played an important role in making me who I am. Navsarjan gave me space to grow and work hard. There are not very many organizations like Navsarjan that will give you that much freedom and opportunity.

BEST PRACTICES IN PEACEBUILDING

SOCIAL JUSTICE STRATEGY	DESCRIPTION OF IMPLEMENTATION	EXAMPLE
Build unity within different strata of the caste system	When there is tension within different subcastes that need to work together in order to make an effective lobby for change, Navsarjan encourages inter-dining to break the cultural taboo of sharing food between castes.	When Navsarjan worked to organize Dalit, Other Backwards Castes and tribal people on labor laws, it served food and tea during training programs to bring together people who ordinarily would never socially interact with each other.
Economic empowerment	Navsarjan provides survivors of violence with means to support themselves financially.	After the communal violence against Muslims in Surat, Navsarjan provided vendor carts for those whose homes had been burned and helped distribute funds for supplies. Many members of the Muslim community who were affected were street vendors and shopkeepers.
Prosecute cases of discrimination under the federal anti-violence laws	In their field offices, Navsarjan hosts weekly walk-in legal aid clinics for people who have faced injustices. Navsarjan then helps them file cases with the police, as well as provides legal and moral support as the case progresses.	Navsarjan filed a case against a family who had kicked out their daughter-in-law, Ramu, after their son died. Ramu sought the aid of Navsarjan in their field office in Ambarelli for rights to her husband's inheritance.
Provide legal education to members of the community	Navsarjan has hosted legal training sessions and translated legal texts in simple language for those not deeply literate in order to create "barefoot lawyers" in the communities. Once people are aware of their rights, they can fight for them.	Beginning in 1992, Navsarjan hosted legal training sessions for women in the village of Vautha, where dominant-caste landlords had been encroaching on the land of agricultural laborers. In 2010, the women gained the confidence to harvest the land they had cultivated and are now enmeshed in several lawsuits.

SOCIAL JUSTICE STRATEGY	DESCRIPTION OF IMPLEMENTATION	EXAMPLE
Raise national awareness of caste-based discrimination	Navsarjan has joined forces with organizations such as the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights to increase the movement's presence in national political conversation.	Before the U.N. World Conference Against Racism, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, held in Durban in 2001, national and state level consultations were organized to debate that Dalit rights be included in the United Nations' agenda.
Raise international awareness of human rights campaigns in India	Navsarjan and its partner organizations sent delegations to the United Nations and the European Parliament in order to raise awareness of Dalit issues in India. It also participates in the International Dalit Solidarity Network, launching networks in countries including Germany and the Netherlands.	Manjula spoke with United Nations diplomats at the preparatory conference for the U.N. World Conference Against Racism, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, raising the issue of untouchability and countering the Indian government's claim that untouchability does not exist in India.
Organize women	Navsarjan focuses on training women for leadership positions both within and without its organization. It also offers vocational training for women, who can then break out of caste-based occupations and fight gender discrimination in the workplace.	Manjula hosted training sessions in Padra for women community leaders, who then organized women in their own communities, eventually bringing together 1,500 women agricultural workers to fight for minimum wages. Within Navsarjan, she also instituted a policy that half of all district leaders must be women, and began grooming them for those roles.
Break intergenerational poverty	Navsarjan educates children in three boarding schools across Gujarat and also offers vocational training on its campus.	Navsarjan operates three boarding schools for Dalit children, offering education as well as vocational skills training. It also hosts vocational training for men and women, including sewing, photography and computer literacy.

SOCIAL JUSTICE STRATEGY	DESCRIPTION OF IMPLEMENTATION	EXAMPLE
Use the media to build awareness of human rights violations	Navsarjan develops ties with local, national and international reporters in order to raise awareness of specific incidents and issues.	Manjula cultivated a relationship with a New York-based senior researcher from Human Rights Watch (HRW) for seven years after meeting her at a National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights event. Later, when communal genocide broke out in Gujarat, Manjula took this same researcher to relief camps and into violence-stricken zones, which eventually led to the HRW publication “We Have No Orders to Save You.”

FURTHER READING –
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BIOGRAPHY OF A PEACE WRITER –
AMY S. CHOI



Photo credit: Michele Zousmer

Amy S. Choi is a freelance journalist based in Brooklyn, N.Y. Her work has appeared in *BusinessWeek*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Women's Wear Daily*, *The Philadelphia City Paper* and *Time Out New York*, among other publications. A dedicated storyteller and volunteer, over the past decade she has worked with organizations such as Minds Matter and The All-Stars Project to reach out to low-income urban youth in New York using writing and performance. Taking a sabbatical in 2010 to travel through the developing world, including Colombia, Tunisia, Lebanon, India and Southeast Asia, Choi emerged with a commitment to report and write about human rights and peace activism both domestically and globally, as well as a deep commitment to gender issues. Choi holds undergraduate degrees in journalism and poetry from Northwestern University.

JOAN B. KROC INSTITUTE FOR PEACE & JUSTICE

The mission of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice (IPJ) is to foster peace, cultivate justice and create a safer world. Through education, research and peacemaking activities, the IPJ offers programs that advance scholarship and practice in conflict resolution and human rights. The institute, a unit of the University of San Diego's Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies, draws on Catholic social teaching that sees peace as inseparable from justice and acts to prevent and resolve conflicts that threaten local, national and international peace.

The IPJ was established in 2000 through a generous gift from the late Joan B. Kroc to the University of San Diego to create an institute for the study and practice of peace and justice. Programming began in early 2001 and the building was dedicated in December 2001 with a conference, "Peacemaking with Justice: Policy for the 21st Century."

The institute strives, in Joan B. Kroc's words, to not only talk about peace, but also make peace. In its peacebuilding initiatives, the IPJ works with local partners to help strengthen their efforts to consolidate peace with justice in the communities in which they live. In Nepal, for example, for more than a decade the IPJ has been working with Nepali groups to support inclusiveness and dialogue in the transition from armed conflict and monarchy to peace and multiparty democracy. In its West African Human Rights Training Initiative, the institute partners with local human rights groups to strengthen their ability to pressure government for reform and accountability. And the Guatemala Justice Project is currently implementing a legal empowerment program in the indigenous region of Quiché.

In addition to the Women PeaceMakers Program, the institute has several ongoing programs. The Joan B. Kroc Distinguished Lecture Series is a forum for high-level national and international leaders and policymakers to share their knowledge and perspective on issues related to peace and justice.

WorldLink, a year-round educational program for middle school and high school students from San Diego and Baja California, connects youth to global affairs.

Community outreach includes speakers, films, art and opportunities for discussion between community members, academics and practitioners on issues of peace and social justice, as well as dialogue with national and international leaders in government, nongovernmental organizations and the military.

In addition to the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice, the Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies includes the Trans-Border Institute, which promotes border-related scholarship and an active role for the university in the cross-border community, and a master's program in Peace and Justice Studies to train future leaders in the field.

UNIVERSITY OF SAN DIEGO

Chartered in 1949, the University of San Diego (USD) is a Roman Catholic institution of higher learning located on 180 acres overlooking San Diego's Mission Bay. The University of San Diego is committed to promoting academic excellence, expanding liberal and professional knowledge, creating a diverse community and preparing leaders dedicated to ethical and compassionate service.

The university is steadfast in its dedication to the examination of the Catholic tradition as the basis of a continuing search for meaning in contemporary life. Global peace and development and the application of ethics and values are examined through campus centers and institutes such as the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice, the Values Institute, the Trans-Border Institute, the Center for Public Interest Law, the Institute for Law and Philosophy and the International Center for Character Education. Furthermore, through special campus events such as the Social Issues Conference, the James Bond Stockdale Leadership and Ethics Symposium and the Joan B. Kroc Distinguished Lecture Series, we invite the community to join us in further exploration of these values.

The USD campus, considered one of the most architecturally unique in the nation, is known as Alcalá Park. Like the city of San Diego, the campus takes its name from San Diego de Alcalá, a Franciscan brother who served as the infirmarian at Alcalá de Henares, a monastery near Madrid, Spain. The Spanish Renaissance architecture that characterizes the five-century-old University of Alcalá serves as the inspiration for the buildings on the USD campus. The architecture was intended by the founders, Bishop Charles Francis Buddy and Mother Rosalie Hill, to enhance the search for truth through beauty and harmony. Recent additions, such as the state-of-the-art Donald P. Shiley Center for Science and Technology and the new School of Leadership and Education Sciences building carry on that tradition.

A member of the prestigious Phi Beta Kappa, USD is ranked among the nation's top 100 universities. The university offers its 7,500 undergraduate, graduate and law students rigorous academic programs in more than 60 fields of study through six academic divisions, including the College of Arts and Sciences and the schools of Business Administration, Leadership and Education Sciences, Law, and Nursing and Health Science. The Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies opened in Fall 2007.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IPJ	Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice
NCDHR	National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
OBC	Other Backwards Castes
PTC	Primary Teacher's Training College
UN	United Nations
US	United States
USD	University of San Diego
VHP	Vishwa Hindu Parishad

ENDNOTES

¹ A version of this paragraph first appeared in the article “‘Women Cannot Cry Anymore’: Global Voices Transforming Violent Conflict,” by Emiko Noma in *Critical Half*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2007). Copyright 2007 Women for Women International.

² The Bharatiya Janata Party, or BJP, rose to power in Indian national politics in the early 1990s. It was led by L.K. Advani, its then-president, a conservative Hindu politician. Advani is widely regarded as responsible for creating a divisive political climate that led to Hindu nationalist extremism entering national politics.

³ *Goti* is a term of endearment used by Manjula’s family.

⁴ *Bhaiyya* is a respectful Hindi term for elder brother.

⁵ Cousin-brother is a close male family friend who is not a blood relative.

⁶ OBCs, or so-called Other Backwards Castes, are one rung higher than Dalits in the traditional Hindu caste hierarchy.

⁷ Tamil Nadu is a southern state in India along the Bay of Bengal.

⁸ *Chamar* is a subcaste of Dalits.

⁹ The Pradeep family migrated from the northern state of Uttar Pradesh to Gujarat in the year before Manjula was born.

¹⁰ Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar is a Dalit human rights activist and scholar who helped frame the Indian Constitution. He worked to eliminate the caste system by, among other measures, abolishing untouchability and by implementing a reservation system that created quotas in government organizations and schools for people of scheduled castes.

¹¹ First floor in India refers to the second level of a building.

¹² Patel is a family name for many landlords in Gujarat. Within the state, the Patel family is so powerful that it has developed into a dominant subcaste itself.

¹³ L.K. Advani is widely regarded as having incited the destruction of Babri Mosque in Ayodhya in 1992. The destruction of the mosque by Advani supporters sparked the communal riots in Gujarat in December 1992, in which an estimated 200 people were killed, mostly Muslims, and 19,000 Muslims were displaced from their homes.

¹⁴ The Congress Party is the other major political party in India. It is considered a progressive party and supports liberal and centrist policies.

¹⁵ “Broken Chair” is a 39-foot sculpture across the street from the United Nations Palais des Nations in Geneva, Switzerland. It was designed by Swiss artist Daniel Berset to represent the fight against the use of land mines.

¹⁶ In 1997, the exchange rate was approximately 35 Indian rupees to 1 U.S. dollar.