

## A Daughter Remembers

Nandana Reddy

*The Emergency was declared on June 25, 1975. NANDANA REDDY recalls the day her mother Snehalata Reddy was imprisoned, and underlines the need to keep memories of those dark years alive.*



The sudden ringing of the phone rips the silence. I rush down the stairs, hoping it won't stop before I reach. I hear my mother's disembodied voice. "They have brought me here again, can you come?" I race to the Victoria Hospital, praying I get there before they take her away.

These images continue to haunt me after 40 years. I still wake up in a sweat to the ringing of that phone, trying to comprehend the madness of the Emergency. I can never compensate for losing her so soon, so young, so pointlessly, still wondering 'why' and to put things right by assuaging my anger with constructive actions. As if by doing so, I can bring her back or fulfil her aspirations. Each day, I realise how miserably I fail. Now, with a cultist Prime Minister, the old fears resurface.

I find her, as always, sitting in the RMO's room having an animated discussion about public health and the care of female prison inmates. She turns to me, almost regal in her bearing, but there is pain and sadness in her beautiful eyes. We hug and kiss wordlessly. I cling to her for a moment; almost believing that if I hold her tight enough they can never separate us.

Time is up. We hug hurriedly whispering "I love you". The police have come to escort her back. I feel limp and helpless as I watch her being led away to the police van. The doors shut and I can barely see her through the grill. Our eyes lock. I follow the van through the streets of Bangalore to Central Jail. The large almost fortress like doors open with a loud grating metallic echo followed by a deafening thud as they hit the inner walls. The van drives in; I lift my hand to wave, she does the same. Our hands freeze in mid-wave till the doors shut with a final bang. I stare at nothing for a long while following her with my mind. The body search. The long walk to the cell. The clang of the cell door, rattle of the key, warden's shrill laugh. Her sitting defeated on her cot. Tears begin to roll uncontrollably. She is so near; yet so far away!

Snehalatha Reddy — or Sneha as she was affectionately called — was born to Indian Christian parents, second-generation converts. My mother resented the British and the colonial rule, so she reverted to her Indian name and wore only Indian clothes. She could spin magic, turning gloom into sunshine and fear into the excitement of adventure. She had a tormented childhood and understood my anxieties. She loved people and abhorred cruelty and injustice. She always paid scant respect to caste and class, with no national boundaries, harboured no discrimination. She taught us to value people and to treasure knowledge and experience. As a feminist she believed in equal rights and abhorred men who used tradition as a cover up for exploiting women.

My parents were Socialists, greatly influenced by Dr. Lohia. Though they expressed themselves through arts, their activism and ideology permeated their lives. Theirs was a partnership based on love and respect. She was passionate and warm; while he was calm, a voice of reason, the tranquil revolutionary. He was the shade that protected her flame.

We find a notebook among her meagre possessions. In it she has written, about the Bangalore Central Jail. “As soon as a woman comes in, she is stripped naked in front of everyone else. When a human being is sentenced, he or she is punished enough. Must the human body be degraded and humiliated as well? Who is responsible for these perverse methods? Shouldn’t intelligent Superintendents, IG of Prisons, etc. go on improving conditions? What is the purpose of every human being born in this world? Is it not to lift mankind a little higher towards perfection? No matter which walk of life a human being is born, his mission is to raise standards in human feelings and thoughts in every possible way.”

On June 9, 1976, she wrote; “At least I have achieved something here. I have stopped the horrible beatings the women prisoners used to get. The food has slightly improved for them. And though the water supply is appalling, yet there are promises for pipes to be connected and that is not bad at all. And most of all, I have made them unafraid a little. I went on a hunger strike till the food improved slightly.”

Though, in 1971, Indira Gandhi was on the crest of popularity after victory against Pakistan, by 1973, North India was rocked by movements against high inflation, economic instability, corruption and deterioration of living standards. In June 1975, the High Court of Allahabad found Mrs. Gandhi guilty of using illegal practices during the previous election and ordered her to step down. Amid nation-wide demands for her resignation, Mrs. Gandhi declared Internal Emergency on June 26, 1975.

George Fernandes proposes to start an underground movement. My mother vehemently argues for it to be non-violent while he defends selective violence. I have volunteered to join in. My mother, though afraid for my safety, grudgingly agrees. She understands I have to discharge my political obligations in keeping with my beliefs. She has taught us well. We cannot be mere bystanders when our constitutional freedoms are being denied.

These are the principles she set for herself and for us all.

She was a most caring mother, giving me courage to explore the unknown, feel grounded even when out of my depth, have the guts to do things not attempted before and to discover through experimentation and experience, secure in the knowledge that I was loved. This was her gift.

On May 1 1976, my mother wrote: “In a real dark night of the soul, it is always three o’clock in the morning day after day.” I wake up in a cold sweat. It is three o’clock in the morning. I keep my eyes closed to stay with my dream. The sound of the closing jail doors, the disappearing police van, her hand frozen in a wave. But I do not let it end there. I take her with me. Now we are sitting by the beach watching a glorious sunset, arms around each other. She is relaxed and at peace. I am safe. I have repaid my debt.

But now we are faced with a repeat performance — a dark shadow that is lengthening and threatening to engulf us, our Constitutional freedoms and fundamental rights. This time it is more subtle and savvy, but blatantly authoritarian all the same. My pact with my parents will not allow me to stand by and watch. I will fight it with all I have.

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***Artist, actor and political activist Snehalatha Reddy was incarcerated in the Bangalore Central Jail during the state of Emergency declared in June 1975, first under the Defence of India Rules and then under Maintenance of Internal Security Act with no hearing. No charges were filed and she had no recourse to a court of law. She died on January 20, 1977, before the Emergency was lifted.***