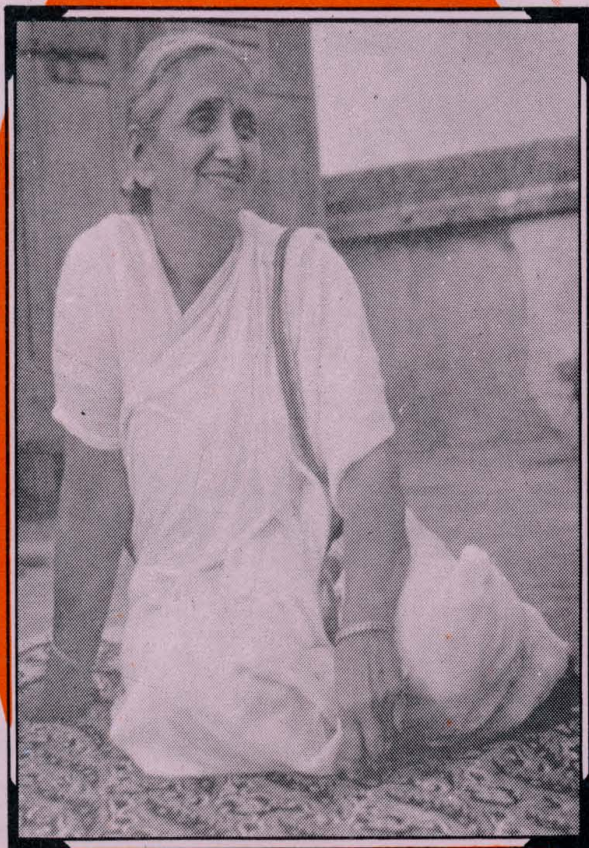


Life Sketch of-



Vandaniya Mausiji



LIFE SKETCH OF

VANDANIYA MAUSIJI

**FOUNDER AND CHIEF OF RASTRA
SEVIKA SAMITI**

SRIMATI LAKSHIMIBAI KELKAR'S

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N A G P U R

Publisher : Sevika Prakashan
Dhantoli, Nagpur (M.S.)

Typesetted By: Pandharipande Computers
Dhantoli, Nagpur.
Ph. 549789.

Printed by : Saurabh Print Process Pvt. Ltd.
157, New Ramdaspath,
Nagpur.
Ph. 548380.

Price : Rs. 14/- (Fourteen only)

**Date of
Publication** : 26/10/1996

MY WORD

I had the honour and preivilage of releasing the HIndi translation of the life sketch of Vandaniya Mausiji, on that occasion I expressed the desire to translate the book into English. By the blessings of God my wish was fulfilled by Vandaniya Ushatai and Mananiya Pramilatai Medhe, who entrusted me with the task to translate in English the Book "Karmayogini Vandaniya Mousiji" written in Hindi.

Knowing Vandaniya Mausiji from my childhood gave me an opportunity to just have a glimpse of her magnificent personality but reading about her gave an insight into her many faceted personality - her unsurmountable courage, her perseverance, her organisational capacities, her deeply spiritual attitude and intense partriotism. The Superb qualities of heart and mind enabled her to start and spread the Rashtra Sevika Samiti nationally and internationally.

The rendering of the book into English is my humble attempt to present the dedicated life and stupendous work done by Vandaniya Mausiji. I offer this to the readers with the hope that it will inspire them to tred the path of valour and do sacrifice for Bharatmata also to emulate the qualities of the great women.

I offer this book as a tribute to the cherished memory of Vandaniya Mausiji.

Rajani Rai.

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Chapter 1

THE LITTLE LOTUS

My country, My Bharat
My Mother, My God -

I dedicate to you oh Mother
My body, soul and very life
Bharatmata, I take a vow,
To battle successfully in every strife.

Let us unfurl the banner of unity
Forgetting the petty quarrels
Let feminine power bring,
Greater and higher laurels.

Shed O' my Hindu sisters
All the old and archaic shackles
Pledge your love, sacrifice and devotion
Do Sevika Samiti's work with
utmost passion.

This loud clarion call, which awoke the dormant feminine power and evoked the feelings of patriotism in the hearts of tradition-bound Indian women, was given by our most venerated, adorable, Vandaniya 'Mausiji'- Smt. Lakshmi Bai Kelkar.

This brief life-sketch of immortal mausiji is dedicated to the great soul, who will always inspire and guide the Sevikas as well as the other Bharatiya women.

Vandaniya Mausiji's life-story is an inspiring tale - a sage of a warrior, who battled against every odd to emerge as a victor. She led a life dedicated to the care and service of humanity and the Motherland - struggling to establish the supremacy of the Hindu ideology - which many of our countrymen, weighed down by the British shackles were beginning to forget.

Datey family, residing in Mahal area, rejoiced on 6th July, 1905, when they were blessed with a beautiful daughter. The doctor was so attracted by the exceptional glow on the infants's face, that he suggested that the baby should be called 'Kamal' i.e. 'Lotus flower' - "Like a lotus blossom, she will attract every one with her inner qualities and external beauty", the doctor's words were to prove prophetic. It was a co-incident that the faithful devotee of Shree Ram, respected Mausiji, was born in the Rammandir Lane of Mahal in Nagpur.

As a child, Kamal was adored by everyone. She loved going to the temples with her auntie, popularly known as 'Dai'. The bhajans, the stories and the Hindu rituals, to which Kamal was exposed at the temples, left an indelible impression on her heart and mind.

Kamal was eager to go to school. She was admitted to 'Mission School' which was only one girl's school situated near Kamal's residence. Kamal entered an alien environment. What she was being taught in the school was contrary to what she had been learning in the company of 'Dai' and her mother. She disliked the criticism of her Hindu gods and goddesses. Yet for the sake of learning, she tried to adjust to that environment.

Then came a turning point - an incident that indicated that even at that tender age, Kamal was courageous, truthful and could stand and protest against anything that was wrong.

All the girls were expected to keep their eyes closed during the prayer time. Kamal was curious whether the teacher also practised what she preached. She opened her eyes and found the angry eyes of the teacher staring at her. The teacher asked angrily, "Kamal, why are your eyes opened?" Kamal retorted calmly, "Madam, how did you know that my eyes are open? Aren't you expected to keep your eyes shut?"

Kamal's fearless boldness won her the reward of a tight slap, which imprinted the palm of the teacher on her tender cheek. The incident also marked the end of Kamal's brief interlude in the Mission School. On reaching home, Kamal threw her bag and declared that she won't go to school any more. This decision surprised her mother, Yashodhabai. Then, she saw the imprint of the slap

and asked, "Kamal, why is your cheek so red? Tell me, What has happened?"

Kamal narrated the entire incident and firmly declared, "I shall not go again to that school, where they make fun of my Ram and Krishna and look down upon the Hindu culture. I shall go for kirtans with Dai. Maharajji tells far better and interesting stories than our teachers".

Fearlessness and endurance were the outstanding qualities that were evident in Kamal from the very childhood, Kamal was always in the company of her brothers and behaved like a tomboy, playing all the boyish games. She climbed the trees as dexterously as a monkey, she jumped around and often while playing, bruised her knees and elbows. But, she neither cried in pain nor moaned. She knew that any complaint would result in her games being stopped. So, she smiled and bore everything bravely. It was as if the fate was preparing her to endure the greater blows in the future.

Another remarkable incident, clearly indicated Kamal's leadership qualities and the power of oration which could influence the people.

Kamal enjoyed playing with the dolls as much as she enjoyed the boyish games. She often arranged marriage of the dolls along with her other friends like Shyama Joglekar and Tai Deshpande. One day, the marriage celebrations took place as usual, and the feast began. At that moment, Kamal was called at home for some work. In her absence

an argument started among the kids and the marriage pandal turned into a battlefield. On her return, Kamal glanced at the pandemonium and commanded everyone to be calm in her powerful voice. She said, "Look here, let us forget our petty quarrels. No one is either inferior or superior. Each person has his own importance. Let us not indulge in petty disputes". Everyone was mesmerised by Kamal's speech. Soon, all the arguments were forgotten and order was restored. Kamal had the ability to promptly assess a situation and use appropriate and powerful words to convey her reaction. This coupled with the sanctified atmosphere of the home had the desired impact on her young impressionable mind which also guided her in future.

Yashodabai, Kamal's mother, was also a lady of exceptional courage and intelligence - she also had a remarkable presence of mind. It is not surprising that the daughter of such a mother should turn into an outstanding personality.

In those days, 'Kesari' the daily newspaper, edited by Lokamanya Tilak had the same place in every home as any religious book. Bhaskarrao Datey, Kamal's father, read the 'Kesari' every morning. Later in the afternoon, after the completion of all the household work. Yashodabai gathered all the ladies from the neighbourhood. Lokamanya Tilak's statue was placed on the stool, incense sticks were lighted and Kesari was then read with deep devotion. Even though the semi-literate ladies had to strive to

join the alphabets and formulate the words, yet they never missed reading the 'Kesari' for even a single day and imbibed the spirit behind the letters.

'Kesari' also influenced Kamal very deeply. Hatred for the British imperialism and its repressive measures and resentment against slavery were kindled in Kamal's heart. Kesari indoctrinated patriotism in Kamal.

One day, as Kamal returned home, after her games, she was astonished to see an Englishman in her home, conversing with her mother.

"Is it true that you subscribe to Kesari", he was asking her mother.

"Of course, yes", Ma replied.

"Your husband is a Government servant and buying 'Kesari' is a crime. It is an act of sedition. Don't you know this?"

Kamal was curious to hear her mother's reply. Ma stood her ground, "I purchase Kesari with my money and I am not a government servant."

"But your husband is, and you use his salary, that is the government money to buy Kesari. isn't it?"

"No, you are mistaken again. The money given for the house-hold expenses belongs to the housewife and no body else". Yashodabai said emphatically, "I can spend that money as I please. I buy 'Kesari' with my own money".

The Englishman was speechless. He left without further argument.

Even though Bhaskarrao was worried about the reaction of the British Government to his wife's boldness, he supported her whole-heartedly and encouraged her stand.

These impressions left an everlasting mark on tender Kamal. Whilst living in Nagpur, she was fortunate to hear the speeches of many great patriotic leaders. Every such moment was fanning the fire of patriotism in her heart.

Chapter II

THE BLOSSOMING LOTUS

Life took a new turn when Datey family shifted from Mahal to the Gorakshan Campus in Dhantoli. Kamal had completed her primary school education, and as per the prevailing custom, she was not sent to school any further.

Shri Chaunde Maharaj had organised a vast campaign to save the cows from being slaughtered. All the old, sick and unwanted cows found refuge and solace in the 'Gorakshan Campus'. Maharaj didn't hesitate to even go from door to door begging in order to save the cows. Dai helped in this holy crusade. Whenever Dai went from house to house, asking for alms to save the cows, Kamal often accompanied her. This experience taught Kamal when and how to talk and about the virtue of humility. She learnt, how sometimes one had to endure insults while doing a service for a good cause.

The epidemic of plague swept over the country. Hundreds of people fell prey to this dreadful disease. It had become impossible to get people either to nurse the sick or cremate the dead. But an example of selfless service to humanity, even at the risk of one's own life, was set before Kamal, as she saw

Dai and Anna (her father) dedicate themselves to the service of the plague victims.

Dai attended the sick as well as the pregnant women, irrespective of their caste or creed. Helping Dai taught Kamal the basics of nursing. Anna taught her virtues of patience and endurance. He tirelessly attended to the sick and performed the last rites of innumerable plague victims, whom others had refused to touch.

As Kamal entered her teens, she blossomed into an exquisite beauty. The beauty was not confined to mere looks but she had a glow of goodness and a wealth of virtues. Anna started the search for a bridegroom, who could look after his little dear daughter. But alas. in the matrimonial market, people often weigh the material worth instead of the real worth of a person, Kamal's father had little to offer in the way of dowry. Kamal realised the agony her parents were undergoing in order to find a suitable match due to their limited resources.

One day as Yashodabai was cooking. Kamal quietly stood near her mother. "Ma" she called out softly. "Yes dear, what do you want?" her mother asked. "Kamal, Do you have any problem?" Yashodabai asked again. "Ma, please tell Anna, I shall not marry any person who asks for a dowry".

"Beti, we can't go against the norms of the society. We have to follow the customs. You don't worry. We shall arrange the dowry some how".

"No Ma. Its my final and firm decision. I shall

not marry any person who values money more than any individual. I just won't marry a dowry-hungry man".

Yashodabai looked at her daughter with affection and amazement Kamal was indeed no ordinary girl. And, as per her wishes Kamal was married on her own terms in 1919, at the tender age of fourteen. Her husband Purushottamrao, belonged to the famous kelkar family of Wardha. Kamal began a new life with a new name- Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity and well being . Kamal became a wife and a mother simultaneously. She smilingly and willingly took under her loving care, Shanta and Vatsala, Purshottamrao's two daughters from his first wife. As a child, Kamal was used to looking after her younger brothers and sisters. So inspite of being only fourteen, she had no problems looking after the two little girls. Soon, her affectionate nature, and cheerfulness won everyone's heart in her own home, especially the young girls.

But Lakshuibai soon realised that this new environment was absolutely different from her background. In Kelkar family, it was believed that the women should remain within the confines of her home, and the world outside belonged to men. The women need to be only seen (that too by only the family members, within home) and not heard. Kamal was accustomed to reading the 'Kesari', discussing it, and worrying about the British atrocities. But the kelkars were the devout followers of the British. In

fact, Purushottamrao was quite anglicised. He enjoyed the club evenings where he had earned the reputation of an ace billiard player. His friends had nick-named him 'Sardar', due to his benevolent nature and generosity.

'Sardar' had a different set of values where the home was concerned. He even disliked the idea of women adorning their hair with flowers. He believed that women from good families should not wear flowers in their hair. Lakshmi, who loved flowers, had to deprive herself from wearing flowers after learning about the wishes of her husband. But, she began decorating the lovely long plaits of her daughters with colourful gajaras. In order to please his new bride, Purushottamrao remained quiet for a few days, but later he reprimanded Lakshmi. "Lakshmi, you know very well that I dislike anyone from the family wearing flowers, then why do you dress the hair of the girls with flowers day after day?" Bold and fearless, Lakshmi replied calmly, "I know about your likes and dislikes. Hence, I've stopped using flowers. However, my little dolls love them, I am their mother and it is my duty to keep them happy and comply with their justified wishes". Purushottamrao was speechless before Lakshmi's logic. He was also assured that Lakshmi had proved to be a true mother to the little girls, though she was herself a child.

Lakshmi was blessed with a son in 1920. The Kelkars were overjoyed. Shanta and Vatsala were delighted. Now they too could celebrate Rakhi and

Bhai-duj. The little boy was named Manohar. Children addressed Lakshmi as 'Vahini' in the same manner as their uncle.

Kelkar lived in the joint family. Lakshmi's sister-in-law Umabai, who was unfortunately widowed, was the anchor and the guide of the family. Kelkars had huge farms and family property. There were always several people coming to the house. The farm workers lived with them. A large number of the relatives were always visiting them. Friends like Barrister Abhyankar were also regular visitors. Lakshmi enjoyed the visits of the social reformers. She tried listening to their talks and kept kindled the flame of patriotism which was burning in her heart since her childhood.

Purushottamrao expected Lakshmi to socialise with the ladies of equal status at the ladies club. Lakshmi met ladies of the Behere and Bajaj families, the reputed families of Wardha. The ladies indulged in light entertainment and played bridge to while away the time. Even though Lakshmi was the youngest in the group, she was endowed with exceptional leadership qualities. She told the ladies that it was improper to while away their time when the country was bound in the shackles of slavery and their countrymen were giving their very lives in the freedom struggle. What purpose was being served by their frivolous entertainment? The other ladies soon fell into Lakshmi's line of thinking. Slowly, instead of the cards, the ladies started

reading newspapers and periodicals. discussions were also held about the national issues. Thus, Lakshmi changed the lives of the erstwhile westernised women.

Chapter III

THE TURNING WHEEL OF FATE

Wardha has a very prominent place in the history of our freedom struggle. Mahatma Gandhi led the masses and guided them in the struggle for freedom. after the sad demise of Lokmanya Tilak. When Gandhiji left Sabarmati and selected Wardha for his Ashram, it acquired nationwide prominence. Sevagram became the nerve-centre of all the political activities. Freedom fighters from all over the country thronged the place, buzzing with endless activity.

A massive public rally was organised in 1924. Lakshmi's patriotic feelings couldn't contain themselves. She politely approached Umabai and asked, "Didi, all the great leaders are assembling for the meeting today. We also wish to know more about their efforts to free our Motherland from the bonds of slavery. Please permit Shantabai and myself to attend the meeting. We shall come home, as soon as the meeting is over".

Umabai couldn't turn down the polite request of Lakshmi. She gave them the permission to attend the meeting, but also warned Lakshmi to remember that her little baby would be lonely without her.

Lakshmi's joy knew no bounds. She was happy like a child who had been given his favourite toy.

The public meeting left an indelible impression on the minds of the people. Finally, a call was given to all to contribute their own might to the freedom struggle. A volunteer took a cloth bag around for the donations. Lakshmi removed her heavy gold necklace and put it in the collection bag. Shanta followed suit. Both sisters-in-law were deeply motivated to join the mainstream of the freedom struggle.

Their enthusiastic description of the meeting, created an impact on Umabai as well. She didn't reprimand them for donating jewellery without permission or even knowledge. In those days when women could not take any decision on their own, this was indeed a very bold step. Lakshmi and Shanta also got a green signal to participate in the various programmes associated with the freedom struggle.

Purushottamrao disapproved these activities. His conservative mind disliked the fact that the women should step out of the home. But, Lakshmi co-coordinated the two so well that Purushottamrao didn't get any opportunity to voice his disapproval. Lakshmi kept all the family members pleased with her sweet nature and excellent domestic abilities.

On the one hand, Lakshmi's desire to make herself socially useful was becoming stronger. but on the other hand the domestic chores were binding her more firmly, with the birth of Padmakar, Dinkar,

Ratnakar, Kamalakar and Anand respectively. Yet, Lakshmi managed everything with amazing ability little knowing what cruel joke the fate was about to play with her.

The year 1932 beckoned dark clouds on the happy horizon of Lakshmi's world. This was ironically the year when her youngest son, 'Anand' was born, but instead of joy, her life was filled with sorrow.

Purushottamrao's health began to deteriorate gradually. His ailment was finally diagnosed as tuberculosis. In the thirties tuberculosis was one of the most dreaded diseases, as almost always, it proved to be fatal. Yet Lakshmi hoped against hope, she left no stone unturned for her beloved husband's treatment. She observed fast and performed every kind of worship. She circumambulated 'The Audumbar' tree a lakh of times and kept every possible fast for the well being of her husband. Although her worship wouldn't eventually save Purushottamrao, yet, it gave her a spiritual strength to bear the greatest blow of the fate with stoic courage.

When Purushottamrao saw the shadow of death looming large, he urged his sister-in-law, Umabai to take the reins of the household and look after the family.

At the tender age of twenty seven, Lakshmi had to taste the bitterest poison of life - the agony of widowhood. At this age, with large family and small

kids, life would have been an unbearable burden, but for the spiritual strength, self-confidence and the staunch support of Umabai, who assured Lakshmi that they are not sister-in-laws but sisters. She pledged to take care of Lakshmi till the last breath of her life. Umabai always remained true to her word.

Lakshmi pushed her own grief and misery into the background and took the management of home and the family affairs in her own hands. Although she had to learn everything from scratch - as she knew nothing about the financial matters, property etc. but her sharp brain was quick to grasp the mundane. She learnt that though, there was plenty of landed property, there was a cash crunch. Money was most essential for day to day expenses. Lakshmi took firm steps to resolve the crisis, forgoing the false social norms, she did away with the outward pomp and show. She sold some of her jewellery and repaired the dilapidated house. A part of the house was given on rent to ease the financial problem. A talented young man was called from the village to manage the farms. Thus, Lakshmi managed to bring what were supposedly affairs of 'male domain', firmly under her control.

But, fate had decided to take still more acid tests, Shanta, Lakshmi's eldest daughter, also contacted the dreaded tuberculosis. Lakshmi tried her utmost to snatch atleast her daughter from the jaws of death but, once again, she was helpless.

Lakshmi steered herself and got involved in the care of the family, with exemplary courage and determination.

Chapter IV

THE WINDS OF CHANGE

Little Kamal had transformed into a docile, but determined, happy, young bride, Lakshmi. Who in turn, metamorphosed into a visionary lady who was soon to bring in a change, a silent revolution, which would open a new vistas for oppressed womanhood.

Vatsala, Lakshmi's younger daughter, was interested in education but there were no girls' schools at Wardha then, Lakshmi realised that it affected not only her own daughter but numerous other girls who were keen to study. A solution had to be found, which would work on a long-term basis. Lakshmi's untiring efforts resulted in laying the foundation of the first girls' school at Wardha which is now well established and known as, 'Kesarimal Girls School'. She searched for dedicated teachers and arranged their accommodation in her own house. Venutai Kalamkar and Kalinditai Patankar were the first teachers of the school; they paved the way for women literacy at Wardha. Soon Venutai and Kalinditai were like members of Kelkar family. It was start of the work which later knit the country into a joint Samiti family.

Lakshmi was turning into a calm, serene and mature woman. She realised, that the horizon of a

woman was much wider than being bound to the domestic duties. It was important for her to acquire as many talents as possible, to develop her personality into a multidimensional one. Hence, she encouraged the girls to learn the skills like swimming and cycling. At a later stage, she herself learnt cycling.

She began participating in the 'Prabhat Pheris' and the spinning programmes at Sevagram. Every day, after the evening prayer meeting, some excerpts were read from the 'Harijan', and was followed by question-answer sessions.

One day, Bapu spoke about the role of the feminine power in the process of social development. He said, "Bharat can truly prosper and regain her lost glory only if every woman of this country takes a vow to be Sita. If every woman becomes Sita, the character of the country would change for better. Hence, I request every woman that she should strive to build the qualities of sanctity, devotion, self confidence, dedication, motivation and spiritual strength, which are the hallmarks of Sita".

A young girl present there stood up and questioned, "Bapu, why do you ask only women to become Sita? why don't you ask men to turn themselves in Ram?" It seemed that she had voiced the query in every woman's heart. Why were men being left out of following any ethical code? Bapu smiled at the query and calmly replied, "Beti I won't ask the men to become Ram." "Why?", the girl

questioned. "My dear daughter, Ram is made only through the inspiration of Sita. If women become Sita, there would be no need to try and change men into Ram. Women would automatically inspire them to be Ram".

That day, when Lakshmi returned from the meeting, Bapu's words were echoing in her mind. She realised that there was a deep meaning in Bapu's words. They inspired her to re-read the Ramayan with a new perspective.

In those days it was common belief that women should not read the sacred scriptures like Ramayan and Mahabharat. Some believed that even keeping these holy books at home led to quarrels. Hence, it was very difficult for Lakshmi to get hold of these epics. Finally, she managed to get Shreedhar's 'Ramvijay'. On reading it, she was motivated to read all the versions of Ramayan. Soon, she had made a deep study of all of them. She worried about the problem of abduction of women, which has continued to plague the society, since the days of Ramayan. How could such incidents be stopped? Who would give such women their proper place, once again in the society? These questions worried Lakshmi constantly.

One day, some people who had come from Nagpur, began discussing the plight of the women vendors in the orange market. These women purchased the oranges from the brokers. However, most of the time they had no money, so the fruits

were taken on credit, the credit couldn't be repaid most of the time and the debt kept piling. The agents exploited the situation and physically abused and molested the young daughters and daughter-in-laws of the vendors in lieu of the debt. Such women were considered by the society as tainted and impure, especially as most of the brokers were from the Muslim community. The girls had to suffer the consequences of the deeds for which they were not responsible in the least. Although, the dedicated workers of Hindu Mahasabha, like Dr Munje, strived to get justice for these women, yet the society refused to accept them. Lakshmibai was restless when she heard about the plight of these unfortunate women. Why should they undergo physical, mental and social torture, when they were the innocent victims of the circumstances? How could one heal their wounded mind?

As Lakshmi read the chapter about 'the Abduction of Sita' in Ramayan, realisation dawned that inspite of having the most valient husband like Ram, and a brave and protective brother-in-law like Lakshman, Sita was still abducted. Then, who was there to protect the helpless and discarded women of the orange market? If Sita managed to protect her honour, it was only due to the self confidence and moral strength, neither her husband, nor Lakshman or the vast army was of any help to her. Hence, it was most important that women should be motivated to increase their spiritual strength. Why just the women, in fact the spiritual strength was the

need of the day for the entire Hindu community, which did not retaliate even when Swami Shradhanand was murdered! The Hindus had to wake up from the centuries long slumber.

Umabai often told her, "Lakshmi, why do you think so much? How can we women change the destiny of the society? We are helpless cogs in the wheel of social customs. Forget about such impossible dreams and channelise your energy to make the children into better citizens". Yet, such talk could not dissuade Lakshmi from her path.

At last, Lakshmi had a glimpse of light in the seemingly unending dark tunnel. It came from the most unexpected direction. Her sons paved the way.

One day Manohar asked her, "Ma, please give me money. I want to buy a 'dand' (a wooden stick used for exercising and body-building)". Padmaar and Dinkar echoed after him, "Yes Ma, we also want to buy a dand". "But why?" Lakshmi asked, "are you going to fight with the people?". "No, Ma. We go to Shakha of R.S.S. (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) there they teach us how to march with the dand and even how to use it as a weapon.", Manohar replied. Dinkar added, "Ma, if anyone comes to fight with us, we shall beat him with our dand and shoo him off". He also imitated the action much to the amusement of everyone.

Lakshmi fulfilled their desire. Soon, she noticed a very remarkable change in her sons, they seemed more disciplined, patriotic and obedient. The house

echoed with the patriotic songs and words like 'Hindu', 'Hinduism' and 'Hindustan'. Soon, she realised that there was no need to grope in the dark. She had found the path of reforms and social change for which she was yearning. It was essential to create in the heart of every woman, the pride for ancient glorious Hindu culture. Sangh Shakha could not be restricted to men alone. Women were also an integral half of the society, and it was essential to collect them under a single banner.

Around this time, Lakshmibai read about a horrifying rape case in the newspapers. A woman, who was with her husband, was molested on the road by some goons, and the passers by as well as her husband were silent spectators of this gory episode. Lakshmibai was seething with anger. She realised that women would have to become physically, mentally and spiritually strong. Women would have to be united to fight against the injustices of the society. The only ray of hope seemed to be the training in the Shakha. Vatsala, how would you like learning the use of lathi." Lakshmi asked her daughter. Vatsala was excited. She asked her brothers to teach her. But, they refused saying, "We shall have to ask for the permission first".

One day, Manohar said, "Ma, tomorrow we shall be returning home late. We have to visit the house of every swaymsevak to inform about the visit of our most respected Sarsanghachalak, our head, Dr. Hedgewar. He wants to meet the guardians of all

swyamsevaks". "When, and where is this meeting scheduled?", Lakshmi asked. "Ma" Manohar was surprised. "are you planning to come there?". "Oh, Ma", Padmakar added quickly, "They've called the guardians; that is the father, brother or the uncles and not the ladies". "None of the swyamsevaks' mothers would be present", Dinkar added. Lakshmi replied firmly, "I don't know about other, but I am your guardian, so I shall be coming there". Manohar conceded to his mother's will. "I shall go and ask our chief incharge, Appaji Joshi".

Appaji granted the permission. Lakshmi expressed her desire to meet Dr. Hedgewar. The meeting was arranged at Appaji's residence. Lakshmi was a bit nervous and hesitant. She worried about giving voice to all that was going in her mind. However, Dr. Hedgewar's calm and serene personality and patient hearing encouraged Lakshmi to open her heart. She expressed that the work of revitalization and awakening should not be limited to men, but the women should be equal partners in it. Lakshmi quoted Swami Vivekanand, where he had expressed that an eagle can fly only when both the wings are equally strong. Men and women are both the wings of the society. Unless both were strong, the society will not progress properly, the nation belongs equally to both men and women. How can it progress if half its population, that is the women, remain weak, dependent and do not fulfil their responsibilities? "

There were many more meetings and discussions between the two, at times in Nagpur and sometimes in Wardha itself. Dr. Hedgewar became an elder brother, guide and philosopher for Lakshmi. She also gave a new directions and a larger dimension to Dr. Hedgewar's philosophy. She made him realise the significance of the dormant woman power and how essential it was to evoke and channelise it for the national and social welfare. Finally, Dr. Hedgewar came to a conclusion. He told Lakshmi, "Lakshmibai, I fully agree with you. It is essential to inculcate the right values in women and train them for the service of the nation. However, I do feel that the women's organisation should be separate and their field should also be different from that of men. As you know, I have no experience or knowledge about the ladies. So, I won't be able to do justice to such an organisation. Are you willing to shoulder the responsibility of organising the ladies and bringing them together under a single banner?"

Lakshmi didn't hesitate even for a moment, "Doctorji, I shall strive to the best of my ability to fulfil this responsibility. I am hopeful that with your able guidance and Almighty's blessings, I would be successful in this venture. In case I fail, it would be due to my own short-comings." Dr. Hedgewar explained to Lakshmi, "Lakshmibai, your task is of national importance. You will have to work with utmost dedication. But, you shall be doing a task for which all the Hindus and the entire nation will be proud of you".

Days were spent in discussion regarding the structure of the organisation, its objectives, working etc. Once these details were finalised they deliberated over the name that should be given to the organisation. Dr. Hedgewar suggested that as the organisation would have its own independent entity parallel to RSS, it should have a different name from the RSS, however, the name should be such that both the organisations will have the same initials. Finally, after much brain-storming, they decided that 'Rashtra Sevika Samiti' (R.S.S.) would be the right name. As the words, 'Hindu' and the 'Rashtra' or the nation, have the same connotation, the word, 'Rashtra' was more suitable and had wider dimensions.

This was an epoch-making event. Lakshmi's joy knew no bounds. At last, she had an opportunity to give a concrete shape to her dreams. No doubt, the task was a very tough one, but she had the zest and fervour to attain the impossible.

It was decided that the Samiti would not copy the Sangh in its working. Yet, care was to be taken that inspite of being autonomous, the ideology of the Samiti would be parallel to that of the Sangh. Mutual co-ordination between the two was also essential.

Lakshmi decided to instill a new thought process into the society to inspire the women towards a new ideology. We suffered from lack of confidence due to continuous bondage or British Rule. Our values and culture were considered

inferior to the so-called western ideology. Lakshmi was determined to instill the pride for nationalistic values in the hearts of women.

She told the women, "Sewa or service is the primary duty of a woman. So far, the woman have served the family. Now, you have to widen the horizons of your service. You have to dedicate yourself for the service of the nation. Service is a difficult task. It calls for sacrifices, dedication and utmost devotion towards duty. The service has to be done selflessly. The nation means the society, its traditions and its culture. You have to conserve it, strengthen it and nurture it. No single person can do this task alone. So we have to be united under the auspicious of the Samiti, follow its ideology and discipline."

Venutai, Kalinditai and Lakshmibai went from door-to-door, meeting the ladies, convincing them about the importance of the Samiti work and the need for them to become the 'Sevika' and actively participate in it. Their enthusiasm was unique, some had never heard of such an idea of dedicating oneself to the 'national service'. They willingly joined hands. The number of sevikas kept swelling each day.

After a lot of deliberation, it was decided that the day of 'Vijyadashmi' would be the right one to launch the Rashtra Sevika Samiti. Vijayadashmi is the day of victory of the mother Goddess Durga, when she conquered the demonic evil forces. Similarly, to free the nation from the clutches of the

demonic forces of slavery, and the social evils, the mother-power or the women had to come forward and contribute their might. No other day could be as suitable for the inauguration of the Samiti, as the Vijayadashmi day.

The courtyard of Shri Pathak, of Wardha, was to become the work place of the Samiti.

Chapter V

WE WORSHIP THOU: O'BHARATMATA

25 October 1936, the day of Vijayadashmi, was the turning point for the women of Bharat. Shri Yadav Madhav Kale, Presided over the inaugural function of the Samiti. The 'Bhagva' the banner of Hindu pride was unfurled. A large number of girls and ladies had gathered.

Those were the days when the women remained confined within the four walls of the home. Hence, it was a revolutionary idea that such a large number of ladies and girls should break the tradition-bound chains and dedicate themselves to the Samiti work. Samiti turned into a training ground to mould the women into disciplined Sevikas. It kindled a flame of patriotic fervour in their hearts. The premises of the Samiti echoed with the hymns and the patriotic songs.

Lakshmibai, an affectionate and warm person, became guide, confidant and a role model for the Sevikas. All the Sevikas began calling her as 'Mausiji' who was like a mother to them. She became the most revered figure, due to her selfless service and devotion - thus Lakshmibai, was soon addressed Vandaniya Mausiji.

The Tarun Bharat rightly wrote about Vandaniya Mausiji's unique work whilst paying rich tributes to her after her demise:- "Vandaniya Mausiji in the days when society didn't permit women to go out of their homes was able to bring them together and unite them into vibrant organisation. Women participated in outdoor exercises and showed that they were no longer meek and submissive but powerful sevikas."

Dr. Hedgewar was guiding the working of the Samiti constantly. He sent two swayamsevaks to the Samiti, to conduct a two month long training course in physical education. Mausiji herself was very keen and enthusiastic; she took the training at par with other Sevikas.

Although, the ideological principles which guided the working of the Samiti were the same as those of Sangh, yet, the Samiti, evolved its own independent internal structure and working pattern suitable for women. The Sangh and the Samiti were like the two rails on railway track, which have a definite distance between them but run parallel to reach the same destination.

In a very short span of time, the Samiti shakhas were established at various places of Vidharbha and Maharashtra under the able guidance of Mananiya Tai Apte, Tai Diwekar, Nani Kolte and Kamalabai Sohoni. Dr. Hedgewar motivated the women to start new Samiti Shakhas.

The incident of the first meeting between Vandaniya Mausiji and Mananiya Tai Apte is rather

touching. Dr. Hedgewar gave a letter of introduction to Vandaniya Mausiji and asked her to meet Tai Apte at Pune. Vandaniya Mausiji reached Pune with her youngest son, Anand. When Mausiji reached Tai's residence, she was all set to go out and was in the process of locking the entrance of her residence. The two were seeing each other for the first time, yet, both felt as though they had always known each other.

Mausiji introduced herself, "I am Lakshmi Kelkar. I have come from Wardha". "I know, Dr. Hedgewar had spoken about you and I instantly recognised you the moment I looked at you", Tai replied happily. The tears of joy filled her eyes. Their meeting was like the holy union of Lakshmi and Saraswati. The amazing similarity between their thoughts and ideology, surprised Mausiji. She returned to Wardha, confident and satisfied that as long as women like Tai dedicated themselves to the Samiti, its flag would fly high and it would make progress in leaps and bounds.

Mausiji was nervous and shy of speaking in the public. No sooner did she stand to speak, she began to sweat and shiver. She couldn't gather the courage to express herself. Hence, she often asked either Venutai or Kalinditai to speak on her behalf.

But soon, Mausiji realised that if she wanted her thoughts and ideas to be put forth most effectively and forcefully before the people, she would have to overcome her nervousness and be a

good orator. The word, 'impossible' was not in her dictionary. Once Mausiji was determined, she began practising the art of public speaking. She wrote her own speeches and recited them in the privacy of her home. Whenever she came across a worthy quotation, she copied it in her diary and pondered how it could be used effectively in a speech. Very soon, Mausiji mastered the art of public speaking. An impressive voice, clear diction and soul-stirring vocabulary, were the highlights of her oration. The famous Marathi poet 'Anil' (A.R. Deshpande) has said about Mausiji, "She is one of the greatest orators of Marathi, Cassettes must be prepared of her speeches, so that the people can learn the art of oration from Vandaniya Mausiji's speeches".

Wardha was also growing with the passage of time. It was becoming time-consuming to reach and contact people on foot. Mausiji soon mastered the skill of cycling, taking the help of her son, Padmakar. At the age of thirty five, Mausiji also learnt English.

The work of Samiti had increased, and the Shakhas had spread far and wide. It had become essential for Mausiji to travel and reach wherever the Samiti or the Sevikas needed her. Umabai often worried how Lakshmi would travel alone. But Mai Nagle, Mausiji's right hand, assured Umabai, that she would be always there to escort and take care of Lakshmi.

On Samiti's first anniversary, Mausiji decided that a camp of the Sevikas should be organised.

Prior to organising the Sevika camp, she went to see the working of a Sangh camp.

The preparation began for the camp. Mausiji met the mothers and explained to them the significance of the camp and the need for their daughters to be sent for it. The arrangements were also to be made for the lodging and the boarding of the girls. Those were the times when the girls didn't stay in the homes of strangers. But Mausiji made arrangements for the girls to stay in the homes of various people and got a social acceptance to her revolutionary idea.

The camp was a grand success every day, early in the morning, Mausiji herself attended the 'Prabhat Shakha'. The girls who went to attend the Prabhat Shakha, banged the dands on their way. This disturbed the sleep of some people. Mausiji learnt about it, and told the girls to march with the dands on their shoulders. She explained to them that no action of theirs should annoy people. Thus, Mausiji inculcated a sense of discipline and social belonging among the young sevikas and no untoward incident took place during the camp.

Chapter VI

ONWARD MARCH OF THE MISSION

The year was 1940. Preparations for the summer-camp were on. Just then news of Dr. Hedgewar's illness upset Vandaniya Mausiji. 'God, bless him with long life' - Mausiji prayed incessantly. The nation needed the guidance of this great soul. Mausiji was pained at the thought of losing her guide, philosopher, brother and well-wisher. She went to Nagpur to meet Dr. Hedgewar. Mausiji was deeply grieved, but was helpless.

21 June 1940, was the most eagerly awaited day at Wardha, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose was to arrive in the city. A mammoth crowd had gathered to hear the inspiring speech of their beloved Netaji. Whilst Netaji was addressing the gathering, a man passed him a slip. Netaji read the slip and in voice choked with emotion informed the gathering, "Bharatmata has lost one of the most precious jewel of her crown. Our beloved, Dr. Hedgewar has left for heavenly abode".

The crowd was numb with shock and grief. The atmosphere of joy and enthusiasm turned into mourning. After paying rich tributes to Dr. Hedgewar, the meeting came to an abrupt end.

People rushed towards Nagpur, to have one final glimpse of their beloved leader and pay him their silent homage.

Mausiji bore this shock also with stoic courage, just like the other calamities in her life. Come what may, the mission which was started with the blessings and directions of her beloved brother, Dr. Hedgewar, had to flourish and prosper more than ever before. That would be true homage and tribute which Mausiji could pay to the departed soul.

Samiti was breaking new grounds. The work had spread to the provinces of Sindh, Gijarat, Madhya Pradesh and Punjab. Besides Wardha, the training camps were also being organised at Pune and Nagpur. Even though the Sevikas from Sindh and Gujarat faced the language problem, they overcame the lingual barrier through their dedication and interest. During 1943-1944, the training camp was organised at Karachi. This further strengthened the roots of the Samiti.

Once a girl from Amravati, named Leela, saw the training camp at Wardha. She was deeply impressed. The working and the discipline of the Samiti left a deep impact on her mind. She invited Mausiji to start a Samiti Shakha at Amaravati. Soon, a full-fledged Samiti Shakha was operational in Amravati, thanks to the tireless efforts of Mausiji.

Mausiji's own physical discomfort, pain and problems went into oblivion, when Samiti work was to be given priority. Once, Mausiji went to Amaravati

to attend a function. The train reached late and nobody was at the station to receive her, Mausiji was late in reaching the venue, as she had to search for it. The function had started, as Mausiji always stressed on the virtue of punctuality. Mausiji was all praise for it. After the function the Sevikas gathered around Mausiji to greet her. As they bent down to touch her feet, they saw that the big toe of her right foot was badly injured and it was evident that the toe had bled profusely. One Sevika asked, "Mausiji, how did you hurt yourself?" "Oh, its nothing, I was walking fast and got hurt from a stone," Mausiji replied with a smile, belittling her own discomfort and pain. Through precept, the sevikas also learnt that one should be dedicated to the duty despite hurdles or physical discomfort.

Sometimes, there was a struggle between Mausiji's role as a mother and as the mentor of the Samiti. Such moments were an acid test of Mausiji's integrity. One day, Mausiji had to visit Akola. Vatsala was down with high fever. The mother felt that she had to be with her child at the time of her illness, but the duty as the Samiti's chief, called her to be at Akola. Umabai was aware of the struggle going on in Lakshmi's mind. She assured her, "Don't worry, Lakshmi, as long as I am here, you can be assured of children's well-being. Vatsala would be fine under my care, go in peace." Mausiji left for Akola, attended the meeting and she rushed back to Wardha, without waiting for the meals.

Mausiji was capable of organising the people and turning the impossible into possible through her managerial skills. In 1945, a national camp of the Sevikas was organised at Miraj. Due to the second world war, there was a rationing of rice and sugar. Mausiji called upon the people to contribute only half cup of sugar and a cup of rice for Samiti's cause. Soon, there was a large stock of sugar and rice enough to feed an army of the Sevikas. There was no proper provision of water at the camp site. The water had to be brought from a distance. Mausiji directed the Sevikas to form a human chain for filling the water. Thus, with minimum effort a herculean task was achieved.

Samiti had successfully passed through the initial stages. Mausiji felt that it was essential to give a wider dimension to the work of the Samiti. It was resolved to hold regular meetings and training camps as well as contact people with definite plans. She proposed that nursery schools (Shishu Mandir) and home industry on small scale (Udyog Mandir) should also be set up and run by the Sevikas. She put forth her proposal to the Samiti. It was widely approved and acclaimed by all. Tai Diwekar, Kaku Ranade, Kaku Paranjape, Tai Amberdekar, Jiji Kane also began travelling for propagating the work of the Samiti further.

Indian history took a major turn in 1947. On the one hand Indians were rejoicing as they breathed fresh air of freedom after centuries of slavery. But,

on the other hand the demons of death, disaster and perverted cruelty had a field day, with the widespread communal riots. Bharatmata, for whose freedom thousands had sacrificed their lives, was mercilessly divided into bits. Our beloved motherland was free but the cost for freedom was 'Partition' which was very painful.

At such a time, when nobody dared even to step into the riot-stricken region, where Hindu brothers and helpless Hindu sisters wept and suffered almost alone, Mausiji had the courage to travel to Sindh to be with the Sevikas there. She gave them much needed physical, spiritual and moral support. Sevikas of Sindh had written to Mausiji:

Vandaniya Mausiji,

It is very clear that we can't live in our beloved Sindh. The Muslims have soiled the sacred Sindh through terror, arson and rape - here neither our honour nor our lives are safe any longer. Yet, we wish that before we are compelled to say a final good-bye to our beloved land, you should visit us. We once again wish to renew our vow of dedicating ourselves to the mission; in the presence of our sacred Sindhu and in the presence of a loving mother like you who will always inspire us to do our duty well in the future. We hope, you shall not disappoint us.

Your daughter

Jethi

Mausiji mobilised into action immediately. She reached Bombay on 4 August 1947 along with Venutai and boarded a plane for Karachi. They were the only women passengers. People aboard the plane were surprised to see the two ladies who were daring to go to riot-torn Karachi, all by themselves, without any protection. At Karachi, Mausiji saw the communal hatred and anti-Bharat feelings. Killings and violence were rampant. The names of the roads were being changed. She reached her destination under cover of heavy security.

A very solemn function was organised at Karachi. Almost twelve hundred Sevikas were present. Once again the pledge of the Samiti was revoked. Mausiji was saying the Pledge in calm, solemn and determined words. The Sevikas were repeating it equally solemnly. The pledge renewed their faith in their own strength and abilities. Finally, Mausiji told them, "Be patient and strong to defend your honour; be united; unity is strength. Pledge yourself to the service of your Motherland. This is the acid test."

Many Sevikas asked Mausiji, "Our honour is at stake. What we, helpless women can do?"

Mausiji replied, "Be brave like Durga and no demon would dare touch you. In case the situation is beyond control, come to me, all arrangements will be made and we shall take every possible care of you and your families". On the basis of this assurance, several families arrived in Bharat. Those

who had warrants against their names, were taken under special care and were kept with families in Bombay under pseudonyms.

Hardly the flames of communal violence had begun to subside in the wake of partition, when Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated on 30 January 1948. Once again violence flared up across the country. A ban was imposed on R.S.S., Mausiji suspended the working of the Samiti for a while, keeping the delicacy of the situation in mind. She informed the Central Government accordingly.

This was one of the most trying periods for the Samiti. They were under more severe governmental censure than what they had experienced under the British rule. Unjustified restrictions and regulations were imposed. Who had ever thought that independence would mean a ban on the freedom of organisation and expression? Yet, inspite of every unsurmountable difficulty, Mausiji was not discouraged for even a single moment. Although the exercise sessions and the camps could not be held openly, yet clandestine meetings continued to be organised. The work of the Samiti was being conducted underground.

God gave a golden opportunity to Mausiji to bring together all the Sevikas, when her second son Padmakar's marriage was to be solemnised. She wrote a personal invitation to the Sevikas. They read between the lines the hidden message of Mausiji, and all of them gathered at Wardha. A critical

meeting of the Sevikas was peacefully conducted, under the guise of the marriage ceremony.

Samiti continued to work under the able guidance of Mausiji. They were doing their best to rehabilitate the victims of the communal violence as well as the refugees. Mausiji was also striving to get the ban imposed on RSS lifted. The combined efforts paid dividends when the ban on the Sangh was lifted in 1949. Once again the work of the Samiti Shakhas was openly conducted with renewed vigour. Yet, Mausiji noticed that the needed zest and zeal, which were the very life blood of the Samiti, lacked in the Sevikas. Mausiji realised that the samiti had to be revitalized with fresh energy and motivation. It had become essential to bring the Samiti out of its hibernation.

Chapter VII

SPREAD THE GLORY OF RAM

The dawn was just breaking. The first delicate pink rays had begun to peep from the dark clouds. Mausiji was half asleep when the room was filled with clear blue light. A cave could be seen in front. A voice commanded, "Don't be afraid, walk in". Mausiji, walked into the cave, her heart beating with strange excitement and ecstasy. The chanting of "Shri Ram, Jai Ram", was echoing in the cave, a divine personality was seated, an aura of light surrounded him. There was a book, placed in front of him. Mausiji moved closer and bowed before the sage. He picked up the holy scripture and gave it to Mausiji saying -

"Bring into the world peace and calm
Spread every where the glory of Ram"

Soon the divine figure of the sage disappeared but the blue glow remained. She woke up with a sense of elation, the words were echoing in her mind, "Spread the glory of Ram".

Mausiji realised that this was the new path that she had to tread. She decided to give discourse on the glory and virtues of Shri Ram to the public at

large. She felt that through these discourses, the Samiti would get a new direction.

Mausiji gave her first discourse on Ramayan at the Mahadev temple, Wardha. About a dozen ladies including her sister-in-law, Umabai, had gathered. Mausiji told the Ramkatha from the very core of her heart. Umabai was moved to tears. She removed her gold necklace and put it on Mausiji's neck. She embraced her and said, "Lakshmi, you truly have the blessing of the Almighty. May God always bless you and may your glory spread far and wide".

Very soon, she was invited to every corner of Maharashtra to spread the glory of Ram. She began travelling in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Bengal. It became necessary for Mausiji to develop a command over Hindi and in her characteristic manner, she left no stone unturned in mastering the language.

How effective and spell-binding was Mausiji's power of oration is evident from an incident. At one place, no audience turned up for Ramayan Katha. The Hostess was disappointed. But Mausiji smiled and consoled her, "Why do you feel bad? Why do you say that there is no audience? When Shri Ramji, Sitaji and Hanumanji themselves are with us, and you are here. We are thereby attaining our goal completing the task we have undertaken". No sooner the Katha began the pendal was filled to the capacity with the audience. Such was the power of Mausiji's oration.

Rajmata Sindhiya invited Mausiji to Gwalior. Her discourses there and later at Baroda were greatly applauded by all. Someone from the audience later wrote to Mausiji, "I have seen such vast gathering at Manikrao Gymnasium only thrice in my life. Once, When Pandit Madanmohan Malviya had come here. The second time during the Kirtan of Shri Afale Guruji and now during your Ramayan discourses. Kirtan attracts people due to dramatization, entertainment and music. But, despite no such accompaniment, your discourse had the audience spell-bound. It is all due to the blessings of Ma Saraswati who speaks through you."

Mausiji narrated the Ramkatha only upto the coronation ceremony. She believed that Shri Ram was an able administrator, a devoted and duty-bond individual and an ideal, whose qualities need to be imbibed in our daily behaviour. The coronation ceremony of Shri Ram was performed with full reverence, glamour and gaiety.

Once the coronation ceremony was to be performed at Borivilli. In those days, as Borivilli was sparsely populated, thefts and robberies were very common. On one hand, the ladies wanted to perform the coronation ceremony with all its associated grandeur but, on the other hand they were afraid about the safety of their precious gold jewellery and silver utensils. One lady voiced her fears. Mausiji told her, "You are talking about fear? If you wish to attain glory, you should also have the courage and

ability to safeguard it". These words inspired courage and determination in every heart. The most spectacular ceremony was then performed.

Mausiji believed that through Shakhas, great and able administrators like Shri Ram, Chhatrapati Shivaji and Ahilyabai could be moulded. Even though the Sevikas were not after power, if the occasion demanded, they must have the capacity to become able administrators. It is mother, who can train the children to shoulder any responsibility in life. Hence, she herself had to be an able administrator as she is the commander of her home. Hence, Mausiji put the ideals of motherhood, efficiency and leadership before the sevikas. The basis on which a mother can lead her family is her sense of duty. It was the motherhood that laid the foundation of duty. The term 'Motherhood' has vast dimensions, it extends beyond the family to town, society, country, nation, and the entire universe. Hence, the personality of a woman is all pervading. Samiti had to strive to develop the personalities of the Sevikas on the ideals of Rani Lakshmbai (Leadership), Ahilyabai (Efficiency) and Jijabai (Motherhood).

Mausiji's discourses on Ramayan have given inspiration and new direction to endless number of people. Mausiji's books on Ramayana pravachans act as a reference book, a text book and even as a Holy book to various people.

It was a firm belief of Mausiji that Ramayan has to be read with complete devotion. Such devotion

helps to understand the core of Ramayan. Mausiji recited Ramayan to firmly inculcate the fact that Shri Ram is our national hero and the ideal on whose foot-prints we must tread.

Mausiji also laid stress on Sitaji's character and her role in the Ramayan. She explained that it is Sita that moulds Shri Ram. It is her sanctity, her courage, her strength, and her fearlessness that made Shri Ram what he was. How Sita developed her own individuality and personality are the vital aspects which one must understand fully. Development of individuality meant realisation of one's duties and responsibilities. This helped Sita to emerge as a victor in both favourable as well as unfavourable conditions. She could mould herself to any situation, as the queen, as a devoted wife and as a devoted mother. Like Sita, every woman must realize her duty in the context of her nation, religion, culture, family, and herself; She should fulfil them to the best of her ability and be ready to make sacrifices if necessary.

Whenever Mausiji delivered a discourse, people came forward whole-heartedly to give donations. But, Mausiji didn't use even a paisa for herself. All the fund went into the construction of the Ahalya Mandir at Nagpur Ashtabhuj Temple at Wardha and at many other places. Once in 1977, there was a massive gathering at Ahalya Mandir, Nagpur, as Mausiji had completed 108 speeches. Was it a mere co-incidence or a stroke of good luck; or the

blessings of Lord Shri Ram, that on the same day all the Sangh Swayamsevaks and dignitaries who had been imprisoned during the Emergency, were released and reached the Ahalya Mandir to partake of the prasad.

Chapter VIII

THE MOULDING OF A NEW THOUGHT PROCESS

Men and women are complementary, yet their roles in society are different. Mausiji realized this fact and decided that even though the aims and objectives of the Samiti were basically similar to those of the Sangh, yet, there had to be a difference, keeping in view the woman's feminine constitution, her nature, her temperament and her role in the social progress. Mausiji's far-sightedness, her intelligence, her deep study and her analytical abilities have all helped to mould the samiti to its existing form.

As the Samiti shakhas spread out of Maharashtra, Mausiji stressed on conducting the prayer in Sanskrit, instead of Marathi, as Sanskrit is the mother of all Bharatiya languages. Mausiji insisted that a true sevika needed to have within the pride of being Hindu, impeccable moral character and patriotism and she also needed to have the ability to inspire in others these very virtues. Life stories and character-sketches of great women from various states were compiled together and they were recited in the morning prayer meeting. This served the dual function of inspiring the Sevikas and bringing

about national integration. The five great elements which enrich our lives and the ten 'Namaskars' were transcribed in poetic form. They are regularly recited in every Shakha.

In the earlier stages of the Samiti, the Sevikas received the same physical training as the men. But later, Mausiji consulted various doctors, physical trainers and yoga experts to design a health and fitness programme which would be in accordance with the physique of a woman. Yoga was included in the programme for fitness of body and mind. Mausiji believed that a calm, self-controlled and sagacious woman alone could bring peace, prosperity and progress in the family.

Streesjeevan Vikas Parishad, an organisation dedicated to the overall development of women was formed in 1953. Mausiji invited eminent personalities like Kamlabai Deshpande, Yamunabai Herlekar, Dr. Hardas and Maharishi Darve. Under their expert guidance and opinion the training programme for physical and mental development of the Sevikas was redesigned.

Mausiji felt that it was essential that the thoughts and ideas of sevikas reached the masses. Hence, to provide the way for sevikas with an opportunity to expose their literary abilities, the publication of 'Sevika' was launched. Initially, this was an annual journal published in Marathi. Now it is being published in Hindi and Gujarati as well. It is now called 'Rashtra Sevika'. Since 1953, Sevika

Prakashan has published the annual periodicals and several books in various Bharatiya languages.

'Grihini Vidyalaya' was also established in 1953 to develop natural talents in women. In the first two months, vocational classes were organised during summers. But presently at Bombay, several short-term courses and training programmes are being conducted through out the year by the Grihini Vidyalaya. 'Bharatiya Shrividya Niketan' was launched to reorganise women's education on the basis of our glorious culture.

A custom of worshipping the Goddess Shakti, in her eight-armed avtaar, was started by Mausiji. This is no blind idol worship nor is it following a blind faith. This is a worship of virtues to promote the growth of the virtues. Mausiji firmly believed that the task of the Sevikas was divine. If a woman has to emerge as 'Shakti' she has to place before her the ideal and idol of Shakti, because a concrete form is more inspiring than an abstract idea. Deep thought was given in designing the idol of Goddess Shakti. The Goddess is depicted holding the Saffron flag, lotus, the Geeta, a bell and Agni-kund. The sword, the beads in the seventh hand and the eighth hand is raised in blessing. Ma Shakti is the Mother of the Universe and her idol depicts the virtues of social awakening, knowledge and awareness of universal motherhood. The first Shakti idol was installed at Wardha, the Kendra of the Samiti, in 1972, later it was installed at Bombay, Bhagyanagar, Nagpur and

at many other places. The 'Ashtabhuja Stotra', a prayer dedicated to Ma Shakti, was composed in Hindi. It was recited during the weekly Shakha meetings.

A woman has greater devotional and musical tendencies. Hence, Mausiji encouraged Sevikas to form Bhajan Mandals. She even inspired the talented Sevikas to compose the life story of Jijamata and Rani Lakshmibai in the poetry form.

Mausiji realised the impact of visuals. Hence, a series of exhibitions were organised on subjects which could inspire and change the psyche of masses. The subjects ranged from the national freedom struggle to Shivaji's life story, life sketches of sister Nivedita, Swami Vivekanand, Shri Ram and array of inspirational topics. The "Cotton" pictures made by Kaku Ranande, were a centre of attraction in these exhibitions, till her sad demise in 1969.

Mausiji called upon all the famous artists of Nagpur, to make a picture each, for the exhibitions. She told them that it was impossible to evaluate the worth of the paintings in monetary terms, however, she offered to pay them expenses incurred on the art material. All the artist contributed whole heartedly in this noble campaign. They didn't even take their expenses from Samiti. Thus, Mausiji inspired the artists to use their artistic skills for the social upliftment and renaissance. They also realised that their contribution was equally significant in bringing about a positive social change.

Rani Lakshmbai's centenary was celebrated on the grand scale in 1958. The exhibition on Lakshmbai's life was also organised on the occasion. Mausiji also felt that it was high time for the Samiti to acquire its own premises. She called upon the Sevikas of Nasik to come forth and be determined to accomplish this task soon. "Rani Bhavan" was constructed at Nasik with Rani Lakshmbai's picturesque statue at the entrance.

Jijamata's tri-centenary was also celebrated on the grand scale at her birth place. On this occasion, Mausiji put forth idea of giving military training to the women. She felt that as women form a vital half of the nation, they should be trained to protect themselves and even the Motherland, if the need did arise.

In order to inculcate pride in our culture and to respect it, every Hindu must give due respect to the saffron flag. This was the firm belief of Mausiji. She insisted that the saffron flag should be hoisted in every Hindu home, on the occasion of Hindu New Year. A small saffron flag should also be hoisted in our puja room, as it would inspire the people at all times.

Mausiji also instilled a deep respect for "Vande Mataram". She felt that every Sevika must know the background of the song. Our Motherland is above everything else, and should be worshipped and revered first and foremost. Thus, began the tradition of chorus singing of Vande Mataram at every meeting in Samiti.

Chapter IX

DEDICATION TO DUTY

Respected Mausiji was not only an able leader and administrator, but an equally devoted and diligent person. Her skill was evident at home and outside alike. She had a keen sense of responsibility and believed in performing the smallest of the task to the best of her ability. What ever was the task that she undertook, however seemingly insignificant and mundance it was, she did it to such a perfection that it almost became a work of art.

Mausiji believed that cleanliness was next to Godliness. Mausiji's home was always as clean and sparkling as a mirror and everything was most orderly. Even the kitchen napkins were spotlessly clean. The pickle-jar covers were daintily embroidered. In spite of her very busy and hectic schedule and her devotion to the Samiti, the house hold chores were never neglected. Mausiji was equally vigilant about the diet. Well cooked, well balanced diet was attractively served with an added ingredient of affectionate care and abundant love.

Mausiji's style of performing puja was equally attractive. Irrespective of the fact whether she was at home or on a tour, she regularly worshipped the Tulsi. Beautiful and eye catching alpana was drawn before the Tulsi. Mausiji was very careful regarding

the aesthetic appeal of the floral decorations. The puja thali looked very colourful and attractive. Even the floral garlands prepared by Mausiji were a work of art. In fact she had a rare aesthetic sense which made even the most ordinary things look sublime.

On returning from any journey, everything was put away neatly in its proper place. Mausiji believed in doing all her work by herself, without any wastage of time.

In spite of her busy schedule and all the responsibilities, Mausiji found time to go on pilgrimages. She had a keen sense of observation and on her return, gave graphic description on the places visited.

Mausiji performed the daily puja with complete dedication and devotion. It was done in a most systematic manner. At one of the houses where Mausiji was put as a guest, she discovered that the puja deep (lamp) and the incense urn were lacking in the puja room, so, she quietly purchased those and added them. Her hostess was deeply touched by Mausiji's gesture.

Once, Mausiji visited a newly formed Shakha. All the Sevikas were full of enthusiasm and excited that Vandaniya Mausiji was visiting them. They even composed a song and sang it with great vigour and devotion. Yet, Mausiji was a bit unhappy. At the end of the song, Mausiji congratulated them for the beautiful composition, but suggested that a slight change was essential in it. A particular line of the

song was, "we are dedicated to Mausiji." Mausiji corrected, "The dedication should not be to an individual but to a task. The task is of the Samiti, of the organisation and of the nation. No person is greater than the task, whoever and however mighty she may be. I am also a sevika of the Samiti". Thus, Mausiji never encouraged sycophancy.

Mausiji was also blessed with an extra ordinary memory and grasping power. She knew all the Samiti songs by heart. She disliked the practice of singing any song by looking into the book. If she met any person once, she could remember his or her name and all the details even after a long passage of time. When the people visited her during her illness, they were amazed by her razor sharp memory. Even though she was meeting some of them after years she addressed them by their names and asked them detailed questions about their families. Even the illness could not fade an iota of her memory.

Vandaniya Mausiji's courtesy, her politeness and her ability to give importance to each and every individual, created a special image of the Samiti in the minds of the people. Once Mausiji went to deliver the Ramayan discourse in a city. The host's old mother could not attend the same due to her age. But Mausiji endeared herself to the old lady by repeating the gist of the discourse to her every day.

Mausiji was like a mother to all the Sevikas. She kept a tab on all the details about their family

members, economic conditions and so on.

A national conference of the Sevikas was organised at Gwalior in 1971. All the Sevikas dressed in the uniform of the Samiti were gathering for the route march, then Mausiji noticed that an elderly Sevika was quietly standing on one side. She was not in her uniform and helplessness was written large on her face. Mausiji, at once realised that her economic condition didn't permit her to buy the saree of the uniform. At once, she called one of the Sevikaş organising the rally and giving her the money, told her to get one saree from the store. She then went to the elderly Sevika and giving her the saree, she said, "I am gifting you this saree as an elder sister. It would give me immense pleasure if you will wear it and join the route march." The tears of joy and gratitude filled the eyes of the sevika.

The incident that occurred during the emergency days of 1976, also indicates how Mausiji took care of the Sevikas. Several family members of the sevikaş were imprisoned. Their other family members could meet them only once or twice a month. Some people from Nagpur were jailed at Nasik. It was difficult for a low income group family to bear a lot of expenses for meeting their kith and kin travelling all the way to Nasik. The husband of one of the sevikas was jailed at Nasik. Mausiji made arrangements for sending this particular sevika to Nasik for the summer classes which were being conducted there. Thus, she could meet her husband

atleast twice a month. When sevika was conveyed Mausiji's message she knew that the classes were simply a pretext of Mausiji to keep her close to her husband. She was deeply moved and touching Mausiji's feet, she exclaimed:

"With the shield of your maternal care; Nothing can ever lack us here".

Truly, it is very difficult to describe in words, the qualities and virtues of Vandaniya Mausiji. She was a rare gem, who combined in herself -

The ability of leadership;
The tenderness of Motherhood;
The proficiency in Duty;
And the glow of Spiritual Beauty;

Chapter X

ATTAINING IMMORTALITY

The untiring efforts of Vandaniya Mausiji once again took the Samiti to the zenith of glory. The Shakha spread to various states and the savikas were striving everywhere to realise the dreams of Mausiji.

Mausiji's foresight, courage, organisational abilities, intelligence and presence of mind, once again came to the fore, when internal emergency was declared in 1975. A ban was imposed on R.S.S. This affected the working of the Samiti as well. Yet, Mausiji motivated everyone to face and fight the repression with confidence and courage. The fundamental rights of the people had been curtailed. The government was using repressive tactics to stifle the voice of the masses. Swayamsevaks and even their family members were being arrested and imprisoned on the flimsiest pretexts.

Mausiji organised the sevikas at such testing time, she organised satyagrahas of the sevikas in various states, so that ban on R.S.S. would be lifted. The sevikas helped and consoled those families, which had suffered due to the police repression. Even during the emergency all the training camps, seminars and classes of the samiti were organised on a regular basis. The Sevikas developed great

strength and courage, which in turn, motivated their husbands and other family members to face the governments excesses with greater courage. The Sevikas never voiced their problems or difficulties, but encouraged their husbands to fight on. The work of the Samiti continued in full force during the emergency period of two years, from 1975 to 1977.

Mausiji's health had begun to decline. Yet her tours and Samiti work continued uninterrupted. A national convention of the Samiti was organised at Bhagyanagar in 1977. The convention was to be held during the pongal holidays. But unfortunately the coastal region of Andhra Pradesh was hit by a cyclone which caused an inestimable damage to the life and crops. A meeting was held to decide whether in the face of such a calamity, it would be proper to hold the convention. After much deliberation, it was decided that the convention should be held with austerity and the spare funds should be utilised for the relief work. The sevikas contributed their full might in the relief operations.

The Bhagyanagar convention concluded smoothly. Vandaniya Mausiji, spoke about the seven energies of the women quoted in Bhagwad Gita. She presented her view point with the most touching, relevant and impressionable illustrations. As Mausiji took her leave from the Sevikas, little did most of the realise that they were bidding final adieu to their beloved Mausiji.

Mausiji returned to Nagpur. Shri Ram Navami was celebrated in style. The summer classes were held as per the schedule, in the month of May. Mausiji conducted all her tours inspite of failing health. Everyone could see that Mausiji needed rest, yet, nobody dared tell her. They knew that restless soul of Mausiji could never be idle. She believed in doing work and still more work.

The Akhil Bharatiya Karyakarini meeting was held in August 1978. A detailed work schedule for the year long activities was chalked out. Mausiji insisted that more work should be done for the welfare of the rural and tribal regions. At this time, Mausiji also fulfilled her cherished desire of years. She had always wished to read and hear the Bhagwat Katha, but somehow due to other priorities, her desire remained unfulfilled. Vidarbha's famous saint, His Holiness Shri Achutya Maharaj, fulfilled Mausiji's desire by reciting the Bhagwat Katha at Ahalya Mandir. Mausiji was deeply gratified and contented. She also had detailed discussions on religious and national topics with Maharaj. Ramayan discourses were to be given at Bharatnagar, in the month of September. Mausiji went to stay with her daughter Vatsala, for the sake of convenience in commuting. Those who were fortunate enough to listen to these last discourse series were enthralled and wished that they would go on till eternity. Little did the audience know that the Almighty had other plans for Mausiji. In these discourses, Mausiji had surpassed herself, she had become one with her Ram spiritually.

The day Ramkatha concluded, Mausiji became a bit uncomfortable at midnight. She slowly dragged herself to the bathroom. She almost fainted there. The doctor was summoned at once. Mausiji had suffered from the cardiac problem. She was rushed to the Intensive Care Unit of the Government Medical College, Nagpur.

The doctor's efforts seemed to pay dividends. Dr. Pramilatai Tople, who was then the health minister, in the Maharashtra government and a Sevika herself rushed to the hospital to see that the very best of the treatment was made available for Mausiji. When Mausiji improved slightly, she observed all the sophisticated gadgets and medicines, which were pressed into her service. She asked the doctors, "Is similar treatment available to the other needy patients or am I being given a preferential V.I.P. treatment?" Only when the doctors assured Mausiji that the same treatment was available for every needy patient, did she permit them to continue with it.

The news of Mausiji's illness spread all over the country through the radio and the newspapers. There was an unending line of the visitors outside the I.C.U. Nobody was permitted to meet Mausiji. The doctors had a tough time, explaining to the visitors that Mausiji needed rest, and they should not disturb her. All the doctors, nurses and the other staff members routinely came to wish her in the morning and touched her feet before starting with

their daily duties. Although the doctors did forbid the visitors from disturbing Mausiji, they themselves, couldn't resist the temptation of talking with Mausiji about Ramayan and other subjects.

As all were about to heave a sign of relief that Mausiji's health was improving, she suffered from another heart attack. Once again, there was tension. In spite of Mausiji's illness, the routine work of the Samiti was going on as usual. The training classes were being conducted at the Ahalya Mandir. The Sevikas from Kerela had come to attend them. They were very keen on meeting Mausiji. They didn't know Hindi, and Mausiji was unfamiliar with Malyalam. Yet, the bond of affection proved to be stronger than the lingual barrier.

The festival of Diwali was celebrated in the hospital. Mausiji was recouping but at a slow pace. Dr. Pramilatai Tople met the docors again. She was happy to note the improvement in Mausiji's health. The Sevikas were delighted with the news. They started planning the details of the nursing care which would be needed at the Ahalya Mandir. A list was compiled and a duty chart was chalked about the responsibilities which would be shouldered by the various Sevikas, Whilst the sevikas were enthusiastically preparing to welcome their beloved Mausiji back amid them, fate had something else in mind. Little did they realise the truth behind the adage, 'Man proposes God disposes .

Mausiji seemed cheerful and healthy as she held light hearted discussions with the Sevikas on 25 November 1978. They were planning to celebrate Rani Lakshmbai's birthday at Rami Jhansi Square. Mausiji gave them detailed instructions. She told them to take special care to cover the puja lamp with a lantern chimney so that it won't blow off with the breeze. But she didn't instruct them about covering her own life's lamp with a suitable chimney, so that it won't extinguish. Who knew at the moment that her soul was preparing for the eternal heavenly celebrations?

During the early hours of 27 November 1978 around 3 am, Mausiji felt uneasy. The doctors rushed to her bedside. In spite of all their efforts, at 3.40 a.m. Mausiji left for her eternal journey. It seemed that she had accepted the heavenly invitation of celebrating the Gyaneshwar death anniversary in heaven. Mausiji herself became a celestial star in the holy morning hours.

There was a feeling of shock and grief, as this sad news was broadcasted in the morning news bulletin on the radio. People rushed from everywhere to Nagpur to have one last glimpse of their beloved and dearest Mausiji.

Mausiji's body was taken to her son, Advocate Manohar's house. Then for the last time, Mausiji entered the Ahalya Mandir, not in spirit but in body. This was a place, which was so close and dear to her heart. The walls which once echoed with the

hymns and discourses of Mausiji were stealing themselves to bid a final goodbye to their beloved, who was the very soul of the Ahalya Mandir.

The last journey began on 28 November 1978 at 4 pm. There was a silent and disciplined ocean of people, who had come to pay their last homage to the departed soul. This was done at 'Shree Shaktipeeth' which was also a creation of Mausiji and later became her memorial.

Mausiji's mortal remains were consigned to the flames. But the glow of Mausiji's life and deeds still illuminates the hearts of her followers and others alike. The seedlings of Hindu philosophy planted by her have now taken deep roots in the hearts of the people. The revolutionary ideas of Mausiji have become well established as social norms. Samiti is progressing in leaps and bounds treading on the path paved by her. Her name would remain etched in golden letters, in the list of the social revolutionaries for posterity.

For Gods work
I now lay my life.
You lent the strength
or me to strive.
Like the worship of
the holy Ganges
by its water Divine.

Chapter XI

DREAMS REALISED

Late Vandaniya Mausiji was a visionary par excellence. Her whole life and work was dedicated to the restoration of women's status through energising their physique by routine exercises and yoga, to rejuvenate the mind by channalising the thoughts through discourses on epics like Ramayan and Mahabharat. Her efforts were to organise the young women and bring them together and imbibe in them the value of our ancient glorious culture, increase their self confidence and love towards the nation and pride for 'Hindutva'. During her life time the work of Samiti spread all over from Jammu and Kashmir to south and from North East to Gujarat. Along with samiti work Mausiji also organised Shishu-Vihar for children's eduction, Bhajan Mandal, Puja classes, Udhyog Mandir and Shree Vidyaniketan.

Vandaniya Mausiji wanted to prepare young women to face the changing socio-economic environment which had emerged after independence. The joint family system was fast disappearing and there was a general feeling that after independence, there was no need for any national movement for reconstruction and that it was entirely the responsibility of the Government. Mausiji therefore

thought it was not enough to have women who were dedicated to the national cause but it was extremely essential that the women should be able, enlightened and efficient housewives, because on them will depend the future of the society and nation. Therefore she thought of giving such a training to sevikas so that they could face new challenges of the changing times whilst nurturing the Bharatiya values and pass on the same to the progeny. Vandaniya Mausiji always tried to bring in new ideas regarding the programme work of Samiti, so that the sevikas could ably meet the challenges and increase awareness of economic independence. After Mausiji's demise Vandaniya Tai Apte took over the reigns of Rashtra Sevika Samiti. During her regime the work of samiti spread to other countries like Kenya, U.K., Mauritius, Durban, U.S.A., Canada, Burma, Malaysia etc. In Bharat itself, most of the places far and near had "Shakhas" of the samiti. To look after their working, 26 full time workers 'Pracharikas' and administrative offices are established in different provinces. Free dispensary, free library facilities, women's hostels, family counselling centres, Bhajan and Puja classes, sewing classes and other activities are organised. The samiti also felt that they should go to the rescue and work for the people of the troubled areas of Jammu Kashmir and Assam.

After Vandaniya Tai Apte. Vandaniya Ushatai Chati is now incharge of samiti activity. She has taken the responsibility with grace and dignity. Her

dedication and devotion towards samiti work and her long association with her predecessors has enabled her to continue and expand the work. Ushataiji is bound to take the Samiti to new heights and wider dimensions thereby fulfilling the dreams of Vandaniva Mausiii

A HOMAGE TO VANDANIYA MAUSIJI

Oh, Almighty's favourite blossom,
Consecrated for Upliftment of Nation,
Come, be reincarnated.

Though thou mentor left mid-way,
But taking the reigns in hands,
New pathways you created,
Come, be reincarnated.

With Ramayan's inspiration,
You dreamt of Ramayan's creation,
At par with idealistic Sita,
Feminine power you venerated,
Come, be reincarnated.

Your sacrifices lay the foundation,
Of glorious women's generation,
We shall tread on thy foot prints,
From traditional shackles liberated,
Come, be reincarnated.

Your inspiration has lighted,
Endless lamps of aspiration,
Their light shall illuminate,
Thy glory for future generations.

Our Appreciation

In the recent years, work of Rashtra Sevika Samiti has spread not only to every nook and corner of our country but also abroad. The need arose to know the life of Vandaniya Lakshmi Bai Kelkar; an enterprising and enlightened patriotic lady. She had the conviction that women can be enthused to realise their unique role in nation-building through character moulding at home. Thus materialised the unparalleled Akhil Bharatiya women's organisation, Rashtra Sevika Samiti, the only one of its kind in the entire world.

'Karamayogini Vandaniya Mausiji', the life sketch in Hindi is inspiring many. It was acutely felt that a book in English also should be published.

Dr. Rajani Rai who had the good fortune to have personal contact with Vandaniya Mausiji and has deep respect for her, volunteered to translate the book to English.

Our congratulations to her for this praise worthy work and best wishes to her in future endeavours.

Sevika Prakashan.