



*The life stories of two South Asian Women in the UK*



# STRIKING WOMEN

Jayaben Desai: 1933 - 2010

JAYABEN DESAI WAS BORN IN 1933 IN DHARMAJ, A VILLAGE IN GUJARAT, INDIA, TO A LANDOWNING FAMILY. SHE WAS ALLOWED TO DO THINGS THAT GIRLS WERE NOT EXPECTED TO DO IN THOSE DAYS -

LIKE PLAYING ON THE STREETS AND FLYING KITES WITH HER TWO BROTHERS.



AS A TEENAGER, SHE TOOK PART IN THE INDIAN INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT AGAINST THE BRITISH RULE, GOING ON DEMONSTRATIONS IN HER VILLAGE WHEN SHE WAS A STUDENT.



WHEN SHE WAS 22, JAYABEN GOT MARRIED TO SURYAKANT DESAI, WHO MANAGED A FACTORY IN DAR-ES-SALAAM, TANZANIA. AFTER THE WEDDING, JAYABEN STAYED ON IN INDIA TO COMPLETE HER TAILORING COURSE, WHICH IS WHEN HER FIRST CHILD WAS BORN.



SHE JOINED SURYAKANT IN TANZANIA WHEN THEIR SON WAS NEARLY TWO. AFTER THE BIRTH OF THEIR SECOND SON, JAYABEN RAN HOME-BASED SEWING CLASSES FOR A FEW YEARS.





AFTER INDEPENDENCE, MANY EAST AFRICAN COUNTRIES ADOPTED POLICIES TO PROMOTE THE AFRICAN POPULATION. TOGETHER WITH THOUSANDS OF OTHER ASIAN FAMILIES IN UGANDA, KENYA AND TANZANIA, THE DESAI FAMILY LEFT. THEY CAME TO INDIA IN 1964. BUT THIS WAS NOT THEIR FINAL DESTINATION.

AFTER THE 1968 COMMONWEALTH IMMIGRANTS ACT IS PASSED, PEOPLE LIKE US WHO HOLD BRITISH PASSPORTS WILL HAVE TO GET A VISA TO ENTER BRITAIN.

YOU MUST ACT NOW BEFORE THEY CHANGE THE LAW!

LET ME GO TO BOMBAY AND SEE WHAT I CAN DO.



YOUR FATHER HAS GONE ALL THE WAY TO LONDON, WITH ONE LITTLE SUITCASE! HE WANTS US TO JOIN HIM IN A FEW MONTHS.

CAN I TAKE MY TOYS?



JAYABEN AND THEIR CHILDREN JOINED SURYAKANT IN LONDON IN OCTOBER 1968.

IT GETS DARK SO EARLY. ALL THE HOUSES LOOK THE SAME, AND THE TREES - THEY LOOK BURNT, DARK AND BARE. I HAD HEARD THAT LONDON WAS THIS GRAND PLACE. IT IS JUST NOT WHAT I HAD IMAGINED!



THERE WAS A LOT OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION IN THE UK IN THE 1960S AND 70S AND IT WAS DIFFICULT FOR MIGRANTS TO GET HOUSING.

NO, THERE IS NO ROOM TO RENT HERE.









JAYABEN AND A GROUP OF WORKERS WALKED OUT IN PROTEST ON 20 AUGUST 1976 AND JOINED A TRADE UNION, APEX.



JAYABEN TRAVELLED ACROSS THE COUNTRY TO WIN SUPPORT FROM WORKERS AND THEIR UNIONS.



WHERE IS SARLABEN TODAY? SHE IS USUALLY THE FIRST TO COME HERE EVERY MORNING.

HER PARENTS STOPPED HER FROM COMING - THEY THINK THAT STANDING HERE ALL DAY AND SHOUTING SLOGANS LIKE THIS WILL BRING SHAME ON THE FAMILY.



AS SUPPORT FOR THE STRIKERS GREW, THERE WERE MASS PICKETS WHICH BROUGHT THOUSANDS OF ORDINARY PEOPLE AND WORKERS FROM OTHER PLACES TO THE NARROW STREETS OUTSIDE GRUNWICK. THE POLICE WERE ALSO OUT IN FORCE AND WERE QUITE AGGRESSIVE TO THE STRIKERS AND THEIR SUPPORTERS.







HAVE YOU HEARD  
WHAT THE SCARMAN  
REPORT RECOMMENDS?  
THEY SAY THAT THE  
COMPANY SHOULD  
GIVE US OUR  
JOBS BACK!

BUT THE  
GRUNWICK BOSS  
REFUSES TO DO SO.  
LET'S TAKE TO THE  
STREETS AGAIN!

BUT IN THE AUTUMN OF 1977 THE UNION  
WITHDREW THEIR SUPPORT FOR THE  
MASS PICKETS.

IN PROTEST, FOUR GRUNWICK STRIKERS STAGED  
A HUNGER STRIKE OUTSIDE THE HEADQUARTERS OF  
THE TRADES UNION CONGRESS ON 21 NOVEMBER 1977.



WHAT BEGAN AS  
A FIGHT FOR UNION  
RECOGNITION HAS ENDED  
UP WITH US CHALLENGING  
OUR OWN UNION!

DON'T FORGET,  
WE WON PEOPLE'S HEARTS.  
SO MANY ORDINARY MEMBERS  
OF THE UNIONS CAME TO  
SUPPORT US, EVEN IF THEIR  
LEADERS HAVE TURNED  
THEIR BACK ON US.

BUT THE UNION DID NOT CHANGE ITS DECISION  
AND THE STRIKE WAS FINALLY CALLED OFF IN  
JULY 1978. JAYABEN WENT ON TO TEACH  
AN ASIAN DRESSMAKING COURSE AT  
HARROW COLLEGE, WEMBLEY.



THE GMB UNION RECOGNISED HER CONTRIBUTION  
WITH A GOLD BADGE OF HONOUR AT THEIR NATIONAL  
CONFERENCE IN JUNE 2007. JAYABEN, WHO DIED  
ON 23 DECEMBER 2010 AGED 77, IS NOW  
CELEBRATED FOR CHANGING THE TRADE UNIONS'  
ATTITUDES TOWARDS NON-WHITE AND  
WOMEN WORKERS.



# STRIKING WOMEN

*Jatinder Kaur: 1950 - \**

JATINDER'S FATHER WENT TO ENGLAND FROM A VILLAGE IN PUNJAB TO FIND WORK DURING THE 1950S. SHE LOOKED FORWARD TO HIS YEARLY VISITS HOME.

WHEN SHE WAS 15 AND ABOUT TO BEGIN HER FINAL YEAR IN HIGH SCHOOL THE FAMILY JOINED HIM IN ENGLAND. SHE WAS EXCITED BUT ALSO SAD AT THE THOUGHT OF LEAVING ALL HER FRIENDS BEHIND.



FATHER'S HOME!

WITH LOADS OF PRESENTS!



LIFE IN THE UK WAS VERY DIFFERENT FROM WHAT SHE WAS USED TO. SOON AFTER SHE CAME HERE, JATINDER BEGAN WORKING AT A PETROL STATION.

WHEN SHE WAS 23, SHE GOT MARRIED TO RAJ, WHO WAS ALSO A RECENT MIGRANT FROM PUNJAB. THEY MOVED TO SOUTHWALL, IN WEST LONDON, WHERE THEY RENTED A ROOM IN A HOUSE. RAJ WORKED AT A POST OFFICE, WHILE JATINDER DID ASSEMBLY WORK IN A FACTORY.



I REALLY WANT TO GO BACK TO SCHOOL.



I HAVE FOUND ANOTHER JOB AT THE NEWSAGENT'S.

ARE YOU LEAVING YOUR DAY JOB AT THE FACTORY?

NO, I CAN DO THIS IN THE EVENINGS. HOW ELSE WILL WE MANAGE TO BUY OUR OWN PLACE?

\*NAME HAS BEEN CHANGED TO PROTECT ANONYMITY, AS SUBJECT IS STILL ALIVE.







THE FOLLOWING YEAR, IN 1994, HILLINGDON HOSPITAL CONTRACTED OUT THE CLEANING SERVICES TO A COMPANY CALLED PALL MALL CLEANING.

HAVE YOU HEARD THE NEWS? THE HOSPITAL HAS GIVEN THE CLEANING CONTRACT TO THIS PRIVATE COMPANY.

I WONDER WHAT THIS WILL MEAN FOR US.



IN 1995, PALL MALL CLEANING MADE AN ANNOUNCEMENT.

YOU HAVE 90 DAYS TO SIGN THE NEW TERMS AND CONDITIONS

BUT THIS SAYS WE WILL GET 40 POUNDS LESS EVERY WEEK.



HAVE YOU SIGNED THE AGREEMENT?

NO, IT IS JUST NOT FAIR! HAVE YOU?

NO, BUT URMILA HAS. SHE SAYS WE WILL BE SACKED IF WE DON'T.



THE 90 DAY DEADLINE WAS UPON THEM - BUT OF THE 61 CLEANERS, ONLY 6 HAD SIGNED THE AGREEMENT.

ON THE 90TH DAY IT WAS JATINDER'S DAY OFF, BUT SHE WENT TO WORK TO SEE WHAT WAS GOING TO HAPPEN.

LET'S SHOW THEM WHAT WE THINK!

YES!



THAT NIGHT, THE COMPANY SENT A LETTER OF DISMISSAL TO ALL THE 55 WORKERS.



THEIR UNION, UNISON INITIALLY SUPPORTED THEM, BUT THE WORKERS REFUSED TO ACCEPT THE AGREEMENT UNISON NEGOTIATED WITH THE COMPANY. THEY TOOK THEIR CASE FOR UNFAIR DISMISSAL TO AN EMPLOYMENT TRIBUNAL. WITH THE UNION'S SUPPORT THE WOMEN WON THEIR CASE IN OCTOBER 2000.

THE SACKED WORKERS AT HILLINGDON HOSPITAL HAVE WON THEIR CASE AND ARE TO BE AWARDED BACKDATED PAY AND REINSTATED TO THEIR JOBS.

AFTER 5 LONG YEARS, THIS FEELS GOOD!



TODAY, THOUGH PAST THE OFFICIAL RETIREMENT AGE, JATINDER WORKS PART-TIME AND LOOKS AFTER HER GRAND-DAUGHTER WHILE HER DAUGHTER, MEETA, WORKS AT A COMPANY THAT PREPARES MEALS FOR AIRLINES, GATE GOURMET.

MEETA WENT BACK TO WORK WHEN HER DAUGHTER WAS 6 MONTHS OLD. EMPLOYERS ARE NOT ALLOWED TO SACK PREGNANT WOMEN LIKE THEY USED TO, WHEN I WAS YOUNG.



MEETA WAS CAUGHT UP IN A SIMILAR SET OF CIRCUMSTANCES WHEN BRITISH AIRWAYS SUBCONTRACTED TO GATE GOURMET.

OH NO! I WONDER WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO OUR JOBS.



GRADUALLY, THE COMPANY STARTED MAKING CHANGES TO THE TERMS AND CONDITIONS FOR THE WORKERS AND THE MANAGEMENT BECAME INCREASINGLY HARSH. THE WORKERS RESISTED THE CHANGES.

LET'S TRY INCREASING THE SPEED OF THE CONVEYER BELT. WHY DO WE HAVE 3 WOMEN DOING THE JOB, LET'S TRY IT WITH 2 WOMEN INSTEAD.

THIS IS IMPOSSIBLE!





ON 10TH AUGUST 2005, WHEN THE WORKERS RETURNED FROM THEIR MORNING TEA BREAK...



THE WORKERS ASSEMBLED IN THE CANTEEN TO DISCUSS WHAT HAD HAPPENED. THEY WERE JOINED THERE BY SHOP STEWARDS FROM THEIR UNION.



BY THE NEXT DAY MORE WORKERS HAD BEEN SACKED BRINGING THE TOTAL TO JUST OVER 700.



144 WORKERS WERE SELECTED FOR REDUNDANCY BECAUSE THEY WERE OLDER OR HAD HEALTH ISSUES. THIS TIME, THE WORKERS ALSO LOST THEIR CASE FOR UNFAIR DISMISSAL AT THE EMPLOYMENT TRIBUNAL.





# **STRIKING WOMEN**

[www.striking-women.org](http://www.striking-women.org)

*'Striking Women: South Asian workers' struggles in the UK labour market from Grunwick to Gate Gourmet'* is a Follow-On project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

We have produced three kinds of resources. The first is an educational site about migration, women and work, rights and responsibilities at work and the story of the action by South Asian women during the Grunwick and Gate Gourmet industrial disputes. These resources can be found on **[www.striking-women.org](http://www.striking-women.org)**. This site includes student-friendly research findings, workbooks, time-lines, case studies, learning objectives and activities for students. The second is a two part comic which depicts the life stories of two South Asian women involved with these disputes, downloadable from the site. The third is a mobile exhibition which can be borrowed by community groups and organisations. For further information, contact [sanitha@lincoln.ac.uk](mailto:sanitha@lincoln.ac.uk)

This project builds on the work of an earlier research project entitled "Subverting Stereotypes: Asian Women's Political Activism" carried out by Ruth Pearson, University of Leeds, with Linda McDowell (University of Oxford) and Sundari Anitha (University of Lincoln). Detailed findings from the original research can be found on **[www.leeds.ac.uk/strikingwomen](http://www.leeds.ac.uk/strikingwomen)**

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