

Interview

An Extraordinary Journey of an Ordinary Woman

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Date of Submission: 17/06/2020; Date of Acceptance: 14/8/2020

Jagmati Sangwan is a name which has a global recognition. Someone who believed to swim against the current. She is passionate about women emancipation. Right from childhood she has valued the purpose of being human. The torch bearer of change and progress, she faced a lot of hurdles but her firm belief on the change for the better was her motivation and key to success.

She was born on 2nd January, 1960 in Butana, district Sonapat, Haryana. She did her PhD in sociology. She worked as Assistant Director (Sports) in Maharshi Dayanand University in 1988 and took VRS in 2012 to devote herself completely for women empowerment. She is the founder, secretary, state head of *Akhil Bharatiya Janwadi Mahila Smaiti* and founder of *Himmat Mahila Samooh*. Being associated with *Akhil Bhartiya Janwadi Mahila Smaiti* she worked for gender equality and against sexual violence and honor killing from past twenty years. In the state of Haryana, she is associated with more than 52 women samites.

From 1976-86, she remained captain of Haryana Volleyball team. In 1980, she won a bronze medal in Asian Volleyball held in South Korea; in 1981 she became world volleyball champion (youth), Mexico and participated in 9th Asian Games in 1982. In 1981, she became “Best Rural Women of India” and in 1984, the state of Haryana awarded her “Bheem Award” due to her performance in sports.

She is one inspiration for all the girls and women in particular and for society in general. Interestingly she lived sports in principle and crafted her independent mind to take decision not only in the field of sports rather she nurtured her decision making skills which helped her at every stage of her life. A grounded human being

who relates her experiences with education and development made choices in her life as per her interests and likings. All this were community development driven. She always felt that education of hers should help in educating the community. She is firm about women's participation in politics and the destination of structural development can be achieved through the structural changes. It has been an enriching experience to have a conversation with such an illuminating person.

Abridged Conversation:

NP: Let us begin with the childhood experiences and accounts. Please tell us something about you as a child, your family, your peer and your surroundings so that readers would be able to sketch the socio-cultural context. I am also keen to know about the socialization in family especially the parenting aspect.

JS: I was born in a small farmer's family at *Butana* village of *Sonipat* district, Haryana. My grandfather was of liberal view and a follower of *Arya Samaj*, hence there was a pragmatic atmosphere for girls' education in our family. There was *Gurukul* for girls near my village. These *Gurukuls* used to follow the principles of *Arya Samaj*.

We are eight siblings, three sisters and five brothers. The eldest sister amongst us did not get an opportunity to go school as she helped mother in nurturing of all of us. My grandmother was of dictatorial attitude; she did not like my mother as my mother was of darker complexion and shorter height in comparison to my father; who was a single son with seven sisters and very handsome also. At times our grandmother used to beat my mother but our grandfather and all the seven aunts used to stand with my mother due to her honesty and endeavor and isolate our grandmother and father. I am the youngest amongst my siblings.

Almost every year flood comes in our village, so most of us knew swimming. I used to defeat boys of my age in swimming as well as in marble games. In our village, boys used to play football while girls used to make *upla* (with cow dung cake). We were not allowed to even watch their games. However, at the same time, our village was considered as a centre for educational activities. There was an organization led by Chudhary Dhazza Ram that used to plan tournaments for several days in our village. When we were in the field we used to listen to the sound coming from the playground. While listening to those sounds, I used to wish if I would get a chance to play. And then one day, I managed to watch wrestling in our village. As I was watching the game, a boy of my age was requesting his father that he also wants to do wrestling. His father thought that I am a boy as girls were not supposed to go and watch the

game. His father told me to do wrestling with his son as we both were of the same age. He held my hand and was pushing me for wrestling but I was hesitating. I ran away from there as the second match started.

NP: The most critical phase of one's growth is during school days. How do you feel about that? Do you think that your school has contributed to build your personality and perspectives towards certain issues and practices? Can you share some of the experiences and observations of those days? I know it must be a little faded now but some of the noteworthy instances please share with readers.

JS: When I was in standard VII, a new P.T teacher, Ms. Shakuntala Daangi joined our school. She started a KhoKho game in our school. She used to come from Rohtak and play with us while wearing a trouser and shirt. Her presence changed the entire environment of our school. She was a role model for girls like me. But she got transferred very soon.

Luckily, Mrs. Phoolwati joined our school as a Hindi teacher. She took the initiative to make a team for Volleyball in our school. This step fulfilled the dreams of many girls like me. I and other girls registered our names. Somewhere I had a desire to excel in comparison to the boys team of our village. We used to practice for the entire day irrespective of weather. There was only one ball in our school and we used to go very far to fix the puncture of that ball. In those days, there was a teacher Mr. Ram Singh in co-ed college Gohana near to our village. He used to provide training to boys. Our Hindi teacher contacted Mr. Ram Singh and requested him to send a few boys in our school to give training to girls. Three players i.e. Sube Singh, Dalbir and Satte used to give us training in school. We learnt from them and soon our team got recognition at state level; our team was playing against Kasauli team, one of the best teams of Haryana. Later, in the state of Haryana the first and second position was bagged by either our team or Kidauli team.

Our teacher Ms. Phoolwati was not only a coach for us but her entire approach and strategy towards life was marvelous. She was liberal and her thought process had a strong impact on us. Economically she was not very sound; her husband had opened a small shop and she used to give training to girls on stitching. Later, she became a women sarpanch.

As I completed my 10th education, my parents started looking for a groom. Our teacher Mr. Ram Singh counselled my family and took responsibility for our safety and security, so that we can continue our higher education at Gohana

College. In those days (1977-78) commuting every day from village to Gohana was a challenge. But I got permission from my parents with the help of my teacher.

After a year, my brother came to know about reopening of one of the universities dedicated for sports in Hisar. About 20 sportspersons would be selected from the entire State and the expense of their lodging, food and education would be borne by the state. I also applied there and I was the only girl who got selected. One of the administrators called me and said, *“See you would be the only girl in the classroom and can experience some issues and then don’t complain to me. So if you wish you can withdraw your name from the list”*. I was determined to take admission as I did not want to miss this golden opportunity. I firmly refused his advice of withdrawing my name from the list. Later, three more girls got admission through field trials. This opportunity of accessing free education and getting training in sports was a turning point for my life.

Living on a university campus provides multiple opportunities. We did not have required dresses and other resources, even our culture and language was different. So, mostly we used to remain silent in the classroom, playgrounds and hostel. This situation was not at all acceptable to me and so my friend Jagwanti Ahlawat helped me. She did her education from Kendriya Vidyalaya, Bareilly and had modern dresses too. We exchanged our dresses and did conversation in Hindi. Moreover, I worked very hard in studies and secured first position in my class. I gained my confidence and maintained a routine to balance my studies as well as sports. As we were growing, we faced harassment on campus too. But our instructor Mr. T.C. Kundu was a very genuine and supportive person. Also, the student union was very active in those days.

Playing in Indian team was never easy for me. During Asian games in Delhi in 1982, camps were organized to select players. These camps were for 3-6 months where we used to follow a rigorous routine, under tremendous pressure of being selected or not and we were not supposed to leave the National Institute of sports (NIS), Patiala. I was the only girl representing my state Haryana; however, there were several girls from Kerala and West Bengal. One day, I just said hello to one of my male friends who was my classmate and getting training for an instructor in NIS. My coach saw that I was speaking to male and later he called me and asked, *“Why I was talking with boys?”* I answered him that he was my classmate and we just met and so I said hello to him hello. He informed me that we were not supposed to talk with boys in camp. Further, in my reply he said, *‘don’t try to become a leader’*. Later, I

came to know that I had not been selected for the match. My fellow players and coach criticized me for being vocal.

PR: We would like to know about some of your recent engagements.

JS: Despite winning the bronze medal at Asia level and being University topper I did not get a job for many years due to my progressive thoughts and being married to the man of my choice. Even less meritorious candidates in comparison to me got jobs. Later, in 1988 there was a vacancy for Assistant Director (sports) in Maharshi Dayanand University. Mr. Kapoor Singh was the Director of that University and he was known for his bold and courageous personality. Few people went to him to express their concern regarding my communist thought but there was no one above me in the merit list prepared by the state of Haryana. Mr Singh responded to them, “if she was in merit list, I would select her even if she was granddaughter of E.M.S. In merit list I was on number one and so I got my first job.

After two years, I felt being at the position of Assistant Director I was not in direct contact with sports. So, I joined Maharani Kishori Jat Kanya Mahavidyala as Principal (Physical education) in 1990. Later, I joined University on the same designation.

In 1996, I became head of my organization. Our organization worked on several issues such as domestic violence, gender disparity, citizenship benefits, safe water, women safety and their health issues across India. In Haryana, we worked specifically on Khap Panchayat diktats and honor killing and subsequently we got recognition at National level.

While working on these issues I received many threats and criticism. Our work was shown on the television program *Satyamev Jayate* which was anchored by Amir Khan. Our organization received donations of Rs. 60 lakhs from the public as well as from the organizers of the program. From this money, we established a resource centre counselling and office in Rohtak.

Along with this, I received the *Jijabai Award* from Shivaji College, Delhi University for working against the honor-based violence. My name was also shortlisted for Women of Worth by NDTV in 2015. For the category *Women of the year -2015*, my name was shortlisted but later was removed by the Central Government due to our protest against the rule of fixing the minimum educational qualification i.e. 10th pass for election of Panchayati Raj Institution. We filed a writ petition against it in Supreme Court but it got defended by the lawyer of the central government.

While working in University, I always worked for society and women related issues. I wanted to take voluntary retirement and expressed my view to the vice-chancellor. He told me to establish a Women *Study Centre* in the University and only then he can relieve me from my present role. I established the centre and became founder director of it. Later on Nov, 2012 I took voluntary retirement and started giving my time to our organization Akhil Bharatiya Janwadi Mahila Samiti. I established this organization on 23rd March 1985. In Nov, 2013 I became general secretary of organization and got relieved on Dec, 2016.

NP: When did you realize that the pattern of behaviour of certain agencies are not moving in a justified way? What was your immediate response/reaction? How did you question it?

JS: After 10th I got admission in Sports College in Hisar where food, lodging, education and training in sports were free. As all my expenses related to study and sports were born by the state I was able to entre in the University campus and there I realized girls of my team can easily come here as they were talented (*meri team ki jo ladkiya vo toh saari hi yahan aa sakti thi, unme prathibha thi*) but saddened they were not.

During my international trips in the 1980s, I got the opportunity to interact with women from several countries. There I learnt that the life a woman used to live in India can be lived in other ways too. (*yeh jo Jeevan hai hamare yahan ladkiyo ka mahilaaoo ka isko dusri tarah se bhi jeeya ja sakta hai*). Women in other countries were able to make their own choices; they had aspirations and were achieving it in association with their family and society.

As I said earlier, University campus provides a good platform for exchange of thoughts. During my college days, our student leader used to celebrate International women's day, there I also expressed my views and concerns and observed that it was very well accepted by teachers and students. These platforms used to play a crucial role in providing dignity and equality to women in our society.

During our times, sportsperson who used to be good in academics and had won medals at international level used to be nominated as Deputy Director but I was not very keen despite being done M.Sc. and winning several medals at national and International level. I wanted to work on a profile where I can get opportunity to work towards equality of women in society and so in the initial days I worked as a research fellow near my village. Later I joined as assistant director (sports) in Maharshi Dayanand University where I got the opportunity to work for gender equality.

Being an International player, people called me for inauguration or conclusion ceremonies; there I always tried to guide girls who were talented but lacked resources due to their poor economic condition. Amongst those girls, one of them was an instructor at international level while another joined as a sports office in her district.

All agencies are patriarchal in nature. With education and association with women organizations one can continue to fight for gender equality in our society. I feel where I am today is because of the education given to me by my parents. If they had restricted it, I would not have come so far.

PR: How critical is women's suffering? What are the basic reasons for that? How hard is it to "make choices" in women's lives?

JS: I remembered whenever I left for any match at national or international level; my mother was not able to sleep well. She used to worry for my safety and security. If some mishappening took place, how she would face the villagers. This thought never left me or my mother free. She constantly reminded me that *"beti jis din se bahar bheji hai logo ki sunn sunn kar meri ek roti ki bhuk kum ho gayi hai.....izzat ka khayal rakhna kahin hini na ho jaaye"*.

In 1980, when I was leaving for my first international match, our team met the President of India. On that day I thought maybe today my mother would have slept a little better.

Being associated with sports for so long, I feel the girls who participate in sports were from rural and poor families. Their diet since their childhood is such that they are almost like malnourished and even their coaching is also not a scientific methodology. At the same time, mostly school-going girls get the opportunity to play a sport; many of them were refused permission to play by their parents on the notion that sport will deprive their girls (As personality development of sport girls are like an independent man). Generally there is no independent role of girls/women in patriarchal structure and it is prohibited as well. But by engaging in a sport, girls choose their techniques in social review and apply them in tension of win & lose. By going through this process again and again, they develop as a self-confident person. Primarily, family and society try to stay away from this risk whereas this role of sport was appealing to me, because I knew that participation of a large number of women was necessary to win the wide-ranging medals.

PR: What brought you into social action and carved your identity as a gender activist?

JS: There were several challenges at personal level. My relatives were expecting that I would encash my fame by joining the mainstream politics or industry. But if you chose unemployment, then you would face criticism and there would be tension in relationships. At professional level, there were expectations that I should limit myself in and around sports only and should not engage in these social issues. I should focus on sportspersons who can win at international level. But my opinion was that quality depends upon quantity. I felt that this quality would have its own limitations till many girls would not come to the playground. In our Haryana, there was no dearth of quality amongst girls and so I wanted to work at grass root level. I experienced strong criticism from my fellow sportsperson as they used to say Jagmati Sangwan can make 4-5 players of international level but she was occupied on gender issues and politics and has not done significant professional contribution.

I observed that girls who used to play at University level were more confident in comparison to other girls as these girls were playing in front of the public where they used to take their own decisions, implement it as well as take ownership of the same. So, my concern was that instead of getting 5-6 medals, it would be better if 4000-5000 girls break their social barrier and come at playground (*ek 5-6 koi medal le aaye uski bajaye 4000-5000 ladkiya ground mein utar jaaye.... mujhe yeh behtar lagta tha*). This process of playing sports at ground level would help girls in becoming more independent. Though, this thought was of minority population.

Further, I did my PhD on the lives of those girls who accompanied me in sports till 10th standard but later could not continue it. Through PhD, I wanted to know various reasons that had restricted talented girls to continue with sports.

NP: Is there any end to patriarchy from our lives?

JS: Definitely, there is an end of patriarchy. In past years, we had seen substantial decline in patriarchy. If we look at various parameters that would define the status of women such as education, employment we would find that there is progress in comparison to past. Today young girls are excelling in every field; this signifies that women will acquire all the skills if she gets the opportunity. They are aspiring for a better and dignified life and I will say this is an achievement for our governments.

PR: How significant are the social institutions like family, religion and caste for you? What strategies will you propose to ensure and achieve gender equality and justice?

JS: I feel at individual level one should read literatures that can help in dealing the everyday struggle of life. Also, one should get associated with organizations/ departments working on women/gender issues. These platforms will definitely help in building positivity in self. We should always keep in mind that whosoever are living prosperous life must have paid for that. We have to earn dignity and equality through our everyday struggle. While struggling in everyday life, the conflict that arises are considered as an alien by women. I had seen that women who used to get satisfied with their present resources, they were surrendering in front of their struggle and their life doesn't grow further. Conflict arises while struggling should not be considered as alien rather we should try to establish a synergy with it.

PR: What and where are the hindrances for girls and women to attain their dues and entitlements?

JS: It is the society which has designed the path for girls. As I said that when I reached the university ground, I felt that all my friends were capable of winning medals. All of them were full of strength. They all should be here in higher education and participating in all the activities. Ironically this did not happen. I felt that all were capable but it was sad that the structure of our society engaged in restricting the girls more rather than promoting them to access their choices. Secondly, I want the girls to believe in their passion, whatever may be the field of their choice, they should pursue their dreams. Hurdles are bound to come, we have to learn to overcome them.

NP: Are you associated with any organisation or organisations? Please do share the background and vision of the organization.

Yes, on 23rd March 1985, I established my organization, Akhil Bhartiya Janwadi Mahila Smaiti. As I shared earlier, I got married in 1982 and had my daughter within the first year of my marriage. As she was growing, I thought to begin work for women equality and so Akhil Bhartiya Janwadi Mahila Smaiti came to existence. In 1986, I was chosen as general secretary of the organization. The major role of the organisation is to protect women's constitutional right, assert social justice. The organisation advocates education and employment as empowerment strategies for development of women in particular and society in general. Under her leadership, the organization aims to understand the multiple layers of vulnerabilities in women's lives. The organization is constantly working upon protecting the rights of dalit women.

As stated above, our work was shown on television programme **Satyamev Jayate** and we received donations of Rs. 60 lakhs from the public as well as from the organizers of the program. From this money, we established *Himmat Mahila Samooh* in Rohtak in 2007. Our aim is to economically empower the women and make her self-reliant. Our staffs were providing counselling sessions to the survivors of sexual assault and honor killing. Also, we were hosting seminars and discussions on inter-caste marriages across the state of Haryana. Time to time our organization is providing vocational training to Anganwadi Workers and constituting self-help groups. Along with this, we are helping couples in getting married without the fear of their family or society. Apart from this, the organization is involved in research activities, disseminating information about women's role in agriculture, industry, health and environment.

NP: You are known for your battle against Khap Panchayat in Haryana. How difficult was the journey? Can you explain your action strategies against 'Khap Panchayats' decision on women's issues? What threats, challenges and fear were faced while working against the veto of 'Khap Panchayat'?

JS: I got married on 19th Dec 1982 with Mr. Inderjeet Singh. He was a famous student leader in our University. This decision of my marriage was very well accepted by my family as well as Inderjeet's family. However, some people were against it. Khap Panchayat issued a fatwa against us and when we decided to fight with them they started propagating hatred against me through rumors. There were rumors that I married a person of the same gotra which was considered as a heinous crime in our society.

I went to my in-laws house after the birth of my daughter Aakhila. There I refused to conceal my face with cloth as I was against purdah practice. My in-laws, husband and brother-in laws were in support of me. Also, my sister in-laws refused veil. Gradually, our home was known as "jinki bahue parda nahi kerti". Later, we established our organization and now we were their favorite daughter in-laws.

PR: Your comments on gender equality through political participation, representation and position?

JS: Women should be equally represented at all decision-making platforms. It would help in achieving the goal of gender equality in our society.

Women reservation bill is still pending in our parliament. Whosoever party in majority doesn't aim to pass the bill as they have vested interest and they knew that the moment 33percent reservation will be given to women they need to

leave certain resources for them. We women need to think strategically and should continue our struggle from these platforms that can make remarkable change in future (*kum se kum aisi jagah pe toh lade jahan se hum cheezo ko badal sakte hain tezi k saath*) The presence of women in public spaces makes a remarkable change in that space (*Jahan bhi mahila ki upasthi hoti hai vo vatavarn mannviye ban jata hai*)

NP: There are aware and enthusiastic women who are capable of understanding politics but don't want to join due to foul play and corrupt reputation. What have been your experiences and observations in this regard? Is politics a gendered space in India?

JS: Certainly! Women have all the qualities and skills to join the politics. Tell me, which field is not challenging? Which area is free from corruption? I believe in making inroads rather than quitting. See, the society will remain apathetic towards women if she herself will not assert her rights. You see women reservation bills are pending for such a long time. No other bill was delayed the way it is being delayed almost by all the parties. What does it indicate? The Bill will bring structural changes which is necessary for women and the development of society. The introduction of the bill will bring desired changes and push in changing the structure. I am quite hopeful for such developments in future.

PR: Share some lessons learnt and evolutions took place during your societal engagements. How has it nurtured you to emerge out as a reformer? A nominee for Woman of worth awards, daughters of soil category?

Being a woman and a volleyball player from a small village of Haryana, life always brought challenges to me. I accepted those challenges and moved on. In my school days, I got the opportunity to play volleyball and one of our teachers helped us in learning the skills of volleyball. From there, I worked very hard and our team got recognition at state level. Later, I came to University and I found that my entire team can come here but they were not despite being talented.

During International trips, I was able to talk with women from several other countries. I felt that the life of women in India can be lived in some other ways too. I started helping girls who were talented but lacked resources. In my opinion, quality depends upon quantity; my efforts were always to bring more and more girls on the playground instead of putting all energy in making 4-5 international players. Sports make girls more confident as she learns to take decisions on the field and takes its responsibility too.

I received the Jijabai *Award* from Shivaji College, Delhi University for working against the honor-based violence. My name was also shortlisted for Women of Worth by NDTV in 2015. For the category *Women of the year-2015*, my name was shortlisted but later was removed by the Central Government due to our protest against the rule of fixing the minimum educational qualification i.e. 10th pass for election of Panchayati Raj Institution. We filed a writ petition against it in Supreme Court but it got defended by the lawyer of the central government.

NP: Last but not the least, your message to young girls, women, parents, counter gender/s and to our readers.

JS: My message to young girls, women, and parents is that the present social structure in our society is primarily influenced by Manu smriti and caste system where one social group dominates over the other group based on their caste, gender, class, race etc. We need to build a humane society and civil society (*nagrik samaz*) in association with our constitution where each individual is considered equal, have dignity so that we can establish a democratic environment in our homes.

The deprived sections of our society need to initiate their struggle as the dominant group wants to establish status quo through veracious institutions of society. Amongst youth we are observing an imbalance between their aspirations and their roles towards society. Today youth are full of new ideas but they are lacking civic sense. We need to develop empathy.

NP: Thank you Jagmatijee for your time and passion with which you unfolded the layers of an enriching experience of your life. Your entire journey is inspiring for all of us. We are sure that the readers, the girls and the young generation will set their goals while understanding the relevance of achieving milestones, essence of decision making skills and standing firm with their choices. Thank you again.

The iconic journey of Ms. Sangwan is worth remembering, living and replicating. She is indebted to the circumstances which were favourable in her life. The role of Arya Samaj School of the village which helps in sorting out the issue of basic education. She humbly recognizes the significance of the structural arrangements with regard to school as she says, 'since the school was in the village so girls like me were blessed with primary education'. Moreover, the most important thing she felt was that her family believed in her decision making skills and there was always a space of discourse with the family members. These are the ecological factors which play a crucial role in a person's life. These are the factors which become

resources or barriers in life. The lesson which can be drawn from her life is that one needs to question the stereotypes, one will have to break the silence to secure social justice and one will have to transform the structural setups to undo the learned helplessness.

How to cite this article: Pandey, N. and Rani, P. (2020) 'An Extraordinary Journey of an Ordinary Woman', *Journal of Exclusion Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 2, pp. 253-265.