



PROFILE

Rajashree Bahnji

Under her leadership, the women fish vendors of Versova are today truly a force to reckon with!

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Rajashree Bahnji, Chairperson of the Marol Bazaar Koli Mahila Mase Vikreta Sanstha (MBKMMVS), the Koli Women Fish Vendors' Association of Marol Bazaar, was born into a large fishing family in Versova, Mumbai, in the State of Maharashtra, India. "Twenty years ago, fishing was a profitable business," she says, "but because it required labour, I had to drop out of school after Class Four to help my family." Rajashree's class teacher,

convinced of her high ability, came home to plead with her parents to let her continue studying—but the decision had been taken.

"We would wake up at 3 a.m. in the morning," says Rajashree. "Then a hired lorry would take us to Bhendi Bazaar where we would sell fish until one in the afternoon; come home for lunch and back again to sell fish in the evening bazaar." Rajashree was married off when she was about 16 or 17. Her husband was also in fisheries. His family was large and shared a common house. It was a challenge to learn to live with so many people. Says Rajashree: "Running a household is no less than running a country."

Together with her sisters-in-law, Rajashree sold the fish that the family boat harvested in Mumbai's Marol Bazaar. "The place was very

dirty," she recalls, "garbage everywhere and no place for women to sit. And in the rainy season, our sufferings multiplied!" Then, one rainy day, an event took place that changed the course of Rajashree's life: "I was in the market with my fish in the relentless rain, and before my eyes, my fish—our hard-earned wealth—was getting washed away. Tears fell from my eyes. I looked around me and found that every woman's plight was the same."

Rajashree decided it was time something was done. She took up the issue with the local women's groups. A long correspondence with the municipal corporation began. Soon Rajashree realized that some people from her own community were the biggest obstacle to change. But help was also at hand. "With the support of a local journalist, Mr Patil, we registered our organization, the MBKMMVS, which slowly forced the municipal corporation to act."

Regulations were introduced to mediate the selling activities of the women and the wholesale traders. An indoor area was created for women to sit in, although, according to Rajashree, they prefer to sell their fish outdoors in the sun. The drunks who used to gather at the market were turned out. Toilets were opened by the corporation and maintained by the MBKMMVS for a nominal fee. Lighting is provided by a local shopkeeper for a monthly fee of Rs10,000 (US\$180). The women's request for a canteen space is, however, pending with the authorities.

Rajashree's life has been full of challenges. Yet, under her leadership, the women fish vendors of Versova are today truly a force to reckon with! ❖