

## Defying the Tides

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*WRITER'S COMMENT: For a family history essay in my UWP course, I decided to write my great-grandmother's story: how strong she was as a person and how she had lived in a time that could not deter her from her goals and desires in life. The story illustrates an example of defiance of superstitions and social evils of Indian culture and tradition, which turned to become a new creation of them instead, albeit in the familial setting. I have tried to bring her character to life, establishing a tone of awe and inspiration. Dr. Pamela Demory encouraged me to write about this in the very beginning when I had submitted my topic for the assignment.*

*INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: For the final essay in my advanced composition class (UWP 101), I ask my students to write a "family history" essay, drawing on both primary research (interviews with family members, family photographs and documents) and secondary research—articles, primarily, that will provide some context for the family story. It's a challenging assignment—choosing a topic, identifying a focus, arranging the narrative elements, figuring out how to integrate the secondary research, and making the whole story dramatic. In his wonderful essay about his great grandmother, Janmajaya (JJ) manages all these difficulties with apparent ease. The story is inherently dramatic—his great grandmother was clearly an amazing woman with an amazing story, but the essay's power comes from the way it's crafted—beginning with a photograph, so that as readers we have the opportunity to gaze into her dramatically framed eyes, proceeding through her life story with clearly demarcated dates to keep us on track, and smoothly integrating the impressive research JJ did on women's status in mid-20th-century India and the stories he gleaned from conversations with his mother and grandmother. Toward the end of the essay he reports visiting the village*

*where his great grandmother practiced medicine; he writes that he “had goosebumps all over,” and reading that passage, I had goosebumps, too.*

—*Pamela Demory, University Writing Program*

**I**nspirational stories about women are plenty. But we often forget the strong-willed women who are at the foundations of our own family. This is the story of my maternal great-grandmother, Dr. Hemalata Mohapatra, better known as simply “Amma,” who defied all odds to build a meaningful life and set an example for her entire village.

I grew up seeing my great-grandmother’s old black and white photograph hanging on the central wall of our living room. This image is imprinted on my memory. The grey hair and the visible folds on her neck tell me she was at least in her late fifties when this photograph was taken. Thick black-framed spectacles placed on her broad nose. A firm but affectionate gaze. Draped in a traditional Indian cotton saree and blouse. The traditional necklace made of black and gold beads with a “Bindi” on her forehead. I have always felt as if she were telling me: “Be strong!”

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**Hemalata Mohapatra was born** in 1932, in a small village called “Sheragada” in the state of Odisha, India. She was the youngest child of Mrs. Kamla Devi and Mr. Raghunath Mohapatra. Hemalata had one elder brother, Trilochan, and two older sisters, Sita and Kunti, both of whom were already married.

During the 1930s, India was under British rule and the Indian society was beset with various social evils like untouchability, child marriage, discrimination against widows, the caste system, sati, dowry systems, and more (Kapur 11). The caste system was so deeply embedded in the social fabric that only affluent males in the upper



*Dr. Hemalata Mohapatra, my great-grandmother (circa 1988)*

caste could seek education (Patel 3). Various malicious practices ensured that the lower caste people, especially girls, could not progress in their lives. Hemalata would come to experience these social stigmas.

Hemalata's mother Kamla had always wanted her children educated, and as Hemalata's sisters had already married and had no education, she wished that Hemalata should go to school. When Hemalata was four years old she was married to fourteen-year-old Arjun Mohapatra, the son of a well-known landowner in the village. However, Hemalata did not immediately live with her husband; after her marriage, she abided by the traditional practice of child marriage by staying back with her parents until her in-laws requested her presence at their home. When Hemalata was six years old, it was decided that she would go to school. Kamla convinced her husband to speak to the Zamindar (land owner), Mr. Jagannath Das, who was a kindhearted gentleman. He agreed that Hemalata could accompany his daughter to school. Hemalata would wake up early in the morning, finish her chores, and then get ready to go to school with an old slate and a few leftover chalks. Her teacher, Mr. Padmanabha Panda, recalled, "She was one of our brightest students."

Hemalata was in the ninth grade when her in-laws demanded that she be sent to live with their son. She implored her in-laws that she should be allowed to study, but they refused. However, her husband, now a surgeon at the City Hospital in Berhampur, was very supportive and wanted his wife to continue with her education. Hemalata's happiness knew no bounds when she saw that her husband was supporting her. Though Hemalata's mother-in-law was convinced that even the lamp oil used for her studies was a colossal waste, Hemalata busied herself by working and studying all day and night.

In 1949, Dr. Mohapatra died due to an unexplained high fever. Hemalata was seven months pregnant. She was a young woman in a new family, defying the norms, going to school for education, pregnant, and now suddenly a widow. Widows had to live a life of austerity. They had to shave their head, remove their vermilion (Bindi) from the forehead, remove bangles, necklace and any other jewelry, wear white clothes, and live in solitary confinement (Anji and Velumani, p.70). Chandra puts it succinctly: "[I]n a predominantly male-dominated society like India, widowhood has always been considered a social stigma" (124). In some families, widows would even be asked to leave home and go to religious places to stay in widow homes and serve the almighty. Remarriage and

education for being economically independent were steps that were severely reprimanded by the societal conscience keepers and were next to impossible (Kapur 13). The families who had encountered episodes of a widow at home were scared about their future. Given these circumstances, Hemalata's desire for self-reliance proved to be an uphill task.

**Hemalata never accepted that** she was responsible for her husband's untimely death. It was too fast for her to keep pace with events. To add to the existing emotional problems, she had to bear the insult from her in-laws, the villagers, and the society for being a curse on the family, a bad omen who was responsible for her husband's death. After this, she lost whatever semblance of social rights she had; her in-laws physically exploited her by forcing her to work with the cattle, cooking, and in the fields, harvesting and weeding in the paddy field during summers. She was abused emotionally, mentally, and physically at the hands of people who were supposed to love her unconditionally and help her reach her goals. Instead, she was emotionally abandoned. Her childhood was taken from her and she was like a slave with no worth in her home. Unable to bear the physical and mental torture, one morning she left behind all her dowry and her belongings and escaped to her parents' home. In December 1949, she took her matriculation exams and on May 25, 1950, she gave birth to a baby girl—my grandmother, Subasini Acharya. The village administration decided that Hemalata must abide by the social norms and return to her in-laws' place. However, Hemalata was unwilling and her mother and brother dared to support her wholeheartedly.

An old teacher of her high school, Ramakrishna, told my mother, "Hemalata never felt the need for validation and approval from others." Mr. Sitakanta Das, of the local community reading center, had always motivated Hemalata for higher education. When he met Hemalata after her matriculation results, which she had passed in a second division, Mr. Das strongly recommended her to attend pre-university education in Berhampur, and later complete her pre-medical degree, get a job, and become self-reliant. During those times, the pre-medicals were the foundation for becoming a practicing doctor and were only available in a few cities. This was a colossal task for Hemalata; she spoke to her mother and brother, who strongly supported her. However, Hemalata's father, Raghunath, was against this idea and forcefully told her, "You don't need to go anywhere. Just stay here and take care of your daughter."

Hemalata's brother, Trilochan, was very supportive. He purchased clothes for her, gave some money for her initial expenses and accompanied her and helped her settle down in the hostel, in Berhampur.

It was not easy for a single woman and a mother to leave behind her baby and go to the city for higher studies in 1951. Hemalata was aware of the repercussions she had to bear for not obeying social norms. Soon, she was excommunicated by the village temple authorities and was not allowed back into the village, even to meet her daughter. Hemalata's decision to go against the diktat of the village temple was something that not many could dare. My grandmother recounts one such incident where, one weekend, Hemalata went back to her village because she had missed her. Hemalata's mother convinced her that higher education was vital not only for her but also for the future of her daughter. So, Hemalata went back with a heavy heart and continued with her studies. Unfortunately, in 1954 her father died due to a massive cardiac arrest.

Hemalata always wanted to be liberated. While doing her pre-medical studies she received a stipend of a meager 25 rupees, out of which she saved 15 rupees to send to her mother Kamla. In 1955 after completing her training, she worked as a general physician in the City Hospital in the eastern city of Berhampur. During these years whenever she wanted to see her daughter her brother Trilochan used to bring her daughter Subasini to the city to meet her. After Hemalata was economically independent, she would send money to her mother so that her daughter had a comfortable life and could go to school without any obstacles. She further helped her mother to build a bigger home, get back her mortgaged lands, and purchase more agricultural lands.

**In 1959, Hemalata wanted to work** alongside people and understand the predicaments they were facing. She thought that the villagers were the ignored lot in India and therefore wanted to work in a rural area, so she moved to serve in a government dispensary in a remote village called Baulagam. The dispensary had one small room and a pharmacy counter with one attendant. It was not an easy job for Hemalata to practice the western system of medicines in the village. There were village quacks, black magicians, and dubious practices; falling sick was considered to be a curse on human beings from the gods, so people used to perform religious rituals to overcome diseases like cholera and typhoid.

Hemalata's challenges were multifold; she had to first educate the villagers. She set up a small library in the village and inspired the villagers to learn to read and write. Hemalata went to each door to educate the villagers on hygiene. As there were no trained midwives, she also helped women in childbirth. Hemalata would personally go every evening to the nearby village of Potlampur to ensure the completion of all pathological tests. She slowly gained the trust of the villagers and also of the people of the neighboring villages. They knew that, for anything, "Amma" was always there.

She was the first to start the children's vaccination schedule of BCG in the village. Since children were considered as God's blessing and also helping hands to earn money for the family (Sonawat p.182), villagers were reluctant to use contraceptives. One of Hemalata's most important contributions—for which she was awarded by the state government—was to educate the males in the village about family planning and the use of contraceptives.

In addition to caring for humans, Hemalata was an animal lover. She created a shelter for stray animals and birds where she treated their wounds and cared for them. Hemalata did everything from taking care of her cows to feeding the street dogs and cats on her own. My mother said, "I used to visit my grandmother during her summer vacations and used to play with the small puppies and kittens in the backyard."

I spoke to the present priest of the temple of Sheragada, the same temple authorities who had excommunicated her in 1951. The priest told me, "Dr. Hemalata donated a sum of five thousand rupees in 1969 to rebuild the temple when a cyclone had caused damage to its structure." The village temple priest at the time had excommunicated her from the village for leaving her in-laws to study in the city and disallowed her to see her daughter. Despite the temple's relation with Hemalata, she still contributed.

In December 2019, I visited Baulagam with my mother and my grandmother. My grandmother was reminiscing about the past and remarked, "Everything has changed." There was electricity, roads were connecting the village, and the lakes were almost full of water hyacinth and were being sparingly used for human waste, as there were toilets and bathrooms. We went to the house where my great-grandmother lived, and asked the residents about "Amma." An old lady looked at my grandmother and asked, "Are you Amma's daughter?" I had goose bumps

all over, and felt so proud to witness a place where my great-grandmother was respected and remembered for her kind-heartedness even to this day. Another old lady came up to me and said, "Amma was a great human being. God was kind to us to send her to our village." She went on, "Amma still lives among us." I was confused; she then pointed towards a small cemetery with her idol in the entrance of the village. I felt extremely touched. My grandmother narrated to me that on September 19, 1990, when Hemalata died of cardiac arrest, it was not just the villagers of Baulagam but also a large number of people from the neighboring villages who came to pay homage to the departed soul. Even to this day, every year on Hemalata's death anniversary, people of the village light lamps and pay their homage.

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Whenever I asked my mother about the old black and white photograph, she told me endless stories about her grandmother, about how strong, fearless and affectionate she was. When I was in tenth grade in school, I asked my grandmother to tell me more about her mother. She said, "You know your mother and my mother were just the same?" It was a moment of immense pride for me; I am always in awe of my maternal lineage. I could very much relate my life with my grandmother's and my mother's with my great-grandmother's. I was nine months old when I lost my father in an accident. My mother too was in the accident and was in a coma for three months; when she woke up it must have been shocking for her to realize that I had grown up and my father was no more. I still cannot imagine what she must have gone through, but I have never seen or heard my mother tell me any sad tales. She has been a strong woman and an inspiration to thousands of her students in India. It is known in the family that my mother was the closest to her grandmother; maybe this was the inspiration drawn from her grandmother. I was one year and nine months old when my mother came to the United States for her doctoral studies as a Fulbright Scholar. Though my mother was highly educated and came from an affluent family, it must not have been an easy journey for her, yet she too defied many tides and surfed through successfully.

As I picked fragments of Hemalata's story from my grandmother, my mother, and the villagers, and started connecting the pieces, I felt

there was still so much more to know about my great-grandmother. She was a role model to succeeding generations, especially the women in the family like my mother and grandmother; both had to deal with biases and stereotypes typical of their generation. But they defied the tides and came out as successful women because they have an inspiration in Hemalata. What it is to be a woman is defined by society even today in a restricted manner, no matter which part of the world one is born in. I knew I had to tell the story of this great lady to the world, not just for my sake, but for all generations of my family to come. I almost reached the end of my story about my great-grandmother, when I felt that I missed something in the black and white photo on the wall. I looked at the picture again and could understand the message of the "Bindi "on her forehead, which was loud and clear: "Defying the Tides."

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