

Remembering Usha Tamore

A tribute to the memory of an inspiring and unforgettable woman, who led women fish vendors in Mumbai, India, towards autonomy and strength

By **Shuddhawati S Peke**
(shuddhawati@gmail.com), Programme Associate, ICSF

In 2013, when I started actively engaging with women fishworkers in Mumbai, India, I got to know Usha *tai*. (The word *tai* means 'elder sister' in Marathi, the local language spoken in Mumbai.) She had brought women fishworkers from her network to the women's wing of Maharashtra Macchimar Kriti Samittee (MMKS). In the year that I worked with her, I got a glimpse of her life as both a woman fish vendor and a woman leader who fought for women vendors' rights. I also got to know her as a fighter in her personal battle against ovarian cancer.

Usha *tai* was a strong person. She had separated from her husband for personal reasons, and brought up two sons on her own. She remained a working single mother until the very last days of her life. She succumbed to cancer on 13 July 2014 at the age of 51.

Usha *tai* was a fish vendor in Pickle market of Mahim in Mumbai. She started working as a fish vendor with her mother from the age of 13. She was a bright child but poverty denied her the opportunity to pursue a school education. After marriage, she decided to stay on in Mumbai instead of

going to her husband's village. In 1975, the land traditionally used by women vendors to sell fish was privatised for the purpose of setting up a hospital. Fisherwomen who were unaware of this fact came out in large numbers to protest their displacement from their traditional market site. As a result of their protest, a small market was built by the city corporation behind the hospital that came up. This, however, was not enough to cater to the needs of the women vendors. A few years later, the government threatened them with further displacement. This was when Usha *tai* came to the forefront of the vendors' battle against the local government authorities and politicians. The struggle was successful in preventing their displacement.

Recognising her capabilities, the leadership of a local fishworkers' union called upon Usha *tai* and a few other women leaders from Mumbai to register a district-level women's fisheries cooperative in 2005. Usha *tai* was made the secretary of the newly-formed cooperative. The cooperative under her leadership grew to have more than 5000 women members. However, she was disillusioned by the functioning of the cooperative and the direction it took. She felt that though the cooperative was a women's cooperative, the real leadership and control was in male hands. She refused to be a subservient and started looking for alternatives.

A few years ago, Usha *tai* came in contact with MMKS and happened to attend an

SHUDDHAWATI PEKE / ICSF



Usha Tai in a discussion with representatives of fishworkers organization at a meeting organized by ICSF

ICSF workshop to discuss a study of women vendors in Mumbai. These meetings inspired her to help start a women's trade union. She drew upon the extensive ties she had built over her years as secretary of the cooperative to form the union. What followed was a series of meetings with women in *koliwad*s (urban fishing villages). Usha *tai* was nominated secretary of this proposed women's union.

Under the leadership of Usha *tai* and another stalwart, Ujwala *tai*, women vendors in Mumbai started placing their demands before the municipal authorities. Mumbai's Fisheries Department until then had focused solely on the demands of male fishers. Through this struggle, the Department was, for the first time, made aware of the woes of women vendors. The Fisheries Department was forced to call a meeting with women fish vendors from Mumbai, listen to their issues and promise to cater to their needs. This was the first success of the organized women vendors.

Usha *tai* was also at the forefront of

many other meetings with the government authorities along with the MMKS leadership. Amidst all this, she was also fighting cancer, struggling to earn her livelihood from fish vending, supporting her children, fighting against the wrongdoings in her cooperative and also working towards founding a new women's union. She managed all this with a smile on her face. The harsh effects of chemotherapy, including loss of hair, did not deter her.

Usha *tai*'s views on family and children were very different from those of most other women from her socioeconomic conditions. She was determined to educate her children, and got her daughter-in-law enrolled in college for graduation. She was the happiest person when she was around her granddaughter for whom she had big plans. She kept exhorting other women fish vendors to take control of their lives. She was, and continues to be, an inspiration to many women vendors in Mumbai. ❏