

Fifty-year-old Jharna Acharya is a social activist and a popular name among the Sabar, Lodha and Baiga communities of Paschim Medinipur and Jhargram districts of West Bengal.

Her father, Kashinath Acharya, was a well-known activist of his district and had a profound influence on her life. He was associated with the Land Reform Movement of the state and founded the Keshiari Kusumpur High School. Jharna Acharya also acknowledges the role that her mother Minurani Acharya played in inspiring her to work for the poor and underprivileged sections of society.

Born in 1968 at Keshiari village in Paschim Medinipur, Jharna grew up with the aim to devote her life to the social welfare of the poor and deprived communities of her locality. Completing her postgraduation in Bengali from West Bengal's Vidyasagar University with a special paper on

the DME, leading the movements and struggles of women fishers and playing an active role in mobilizing them around their issues, rights and demands throughout the state of West Bengal.

She now travels extensively at the national level to participate in workshops and conferences where she represents the voice of the fisherfolk communities, particularly the women. In 2019, Jharna represented the women fisherfolk community of West Bengal at the National Platform of Women in Fisheries. In short, she has come to represent the face of the movement of West Bengal's Lodha, Sabar and Baiga communities. As a result of her perseverance and struggle, nearly 2000 people were able to get land pattas (titles) in her area.

Apart from her work as an activist in the fisheries sector, Jharna has several other laurels to her credit.

She works for the betterment of the lives and livelihood of the sculptors in the area. She is the acting president of the Lodha Sabar Community of West Bengal, the Adivasi Baiga Samaj Unnayan Samity, and supports the Development Committee of Stone Artists. She also plays an important role of an advisor to the Medinipur Chhatra Samaj (Medinipur Student's Association). She is associated with many different social and non-government organizations that are fighting for the development of the backward and marginalized section of the society in Purba and Paschim Medinipur and Jhargram districts. She is also a member of West Bengal Save River Committee and is working on the Forest Land Right Act with DISHA, an NGO).

For her innumerable contributions and multifaceted activities towards the development of all these adivasi and indigenous communities, Jharna Acharya has received multiple awards. In 2015, the Kohl Samaj Hayam Sanagam Society recognized her work with a prestigious award presented to her by Sri Madhu Koda, former Chief Minister of Jharkhand. In 2016, she received an award for Social Welfare Work towards Popular Culture and Tribal Culture from the Sonarpur Book Fair Committee, South 24 Parganas, West Bengal. In 2018, the Helping Hand Organisation recognized her special contributions to society with an award. The following year, in 2019, the Hero of our Society Smarak award was given to her by the Medinipur Quiz Kendra Social Welfare Society. On Women's Day the same year, she received the Special Achievement Award from the Purba and Paschim Medinipur District Chamber of Commerce. ❏

PROFILE

Born to serve: Jharna Acharya has dedicated her life towards the social welfare of the poor and the deprived

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Jharna Acharya

Popular Culture, she began her journey as a researcher with a stint in survey work conducted by the West Bengal Centre for Popular and Tribal Culture in 1997. She also undertook surveys on behalf of the West Bengal Archaeological Department and the Department of Sculpture at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) in Kharagpur. As a result of her work as a researcher, she came into contact with diverse backward and neglected sections whose voices remain unheard by the rest of society. Among the foremost of these marginalized sections were the fisherfolk in the districts she travelled.

Jharna developed strong linkages with fisherfolk organizations and began participating actively in raising awareness about the issues and rights of fishing communities. Soon, she became the Assistant Secretary of Dakshin Banga Matsyajibi Forum (DMF), a registered trade union of Bengal fisherfolk communities. She also assumed convenorship of the women's wing of