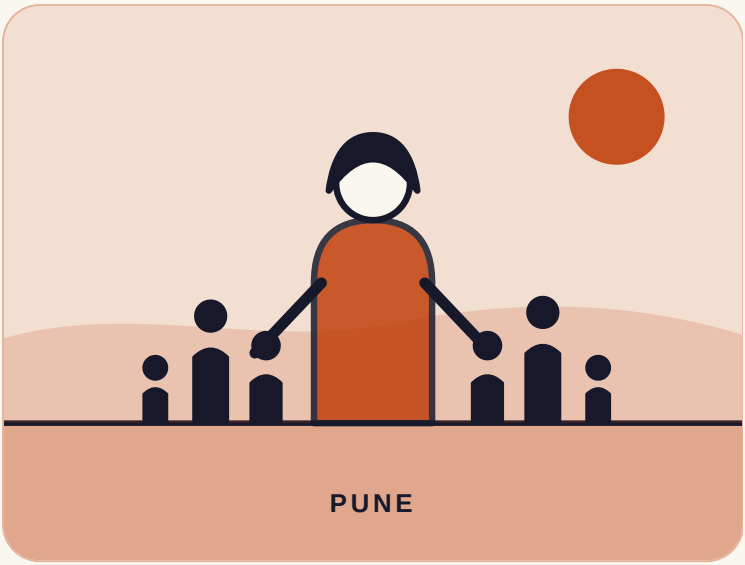

INDIA

The woman called a scrap of cloth

Thrown out while pregnant, Sindhutai Sapkal begged for food. She went on to raise over a thousand children.

WHERE	Pune
WHO	Sindhutai Sapkal, a social worker known as “Mai”, the mother of orphans, in Maharashtra
WHEN	1948 to 2022

4 min read

CHAPTER ONE

The story

Sindhutai Sapkal was born in 1948 into a poor family in Maharashtra, India. Her parents had wanted a boy, so they called her “Chindi”, which means a scrap of cloth. She was married off as a child to a much older man, and she became a mother very young.

She spoke up for justice for others. For that, she was thrown out of her home while pregnant. She gave birth alone. She said later that it was in a cowshed, and that she cut the cord with a stone. Then she begged for food and sometimes slept in a crematorium.

A mother to children nobody wanted

On her travels, she met children who had been left alone. One boy was begging for alms. Sindhutai decided to look after him. Soon there were more, and she begged harder to feed them all.

Wikipedia says she gave her own daughter to a trust in Pune. She did not want to favour her own child over the others.

> **They are not orphans. I am their mother.**
>
> SINDHUTAI SAPKAL, QUOTED BY THE FEDERAL

1,000+

children raised, by the lowest estimate

4

orphanages she set up in Maharashtra

2021

year she received the Padma Shri, a major Indian civilian award

A family that kept growing

People began to call her “Mai”, which means mother. She set up four orphanages in Maharashtra. The children got food, clothes and schooling. She had a special love for girls, because her own parents had been angry that she was a girl. She used award money to buy land for a children’s home.

Asked what kept her going, she said, “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.” Many of her children grew up to be doctors, lawyers and officers. “Today my children have become doctors, lawyers and even big officers,” she said, with pride.

In 2021, she received the Padma Shri. She died of a heart attack in Pune on 4 January 2022. Her daughter Mamata has promised to carry on her work, The Federal reports.

How it unfolded

- **1948** Sindhutai is born in Maharashtra and called “Chindi”.
- **2010** A film on her life, Mee Sindhutai Sapkal, opens at the London Film Festival.
- **2021** She receives the Padma Shri.
- **2022** She dies in Pune on 4 January.

CHAPTER TWO

What makes it special

She had almost nothing, and still chose to feed one more child.

The exact count of her children is uncertain. The sources agree that it was more than a thousand.

OUR TAKE

Sindhutai turned her own abandonment into a home for children nobody wanted.

CHAPTER THREE

What we can learn

1 **Let your pain guide you**

Sindhutai was abandoned herself, and she chose to care for abandoned children.

Try this: Think of a hard time in your life. Ask who faces it now, and how you could help.

2 **Start with one person**

Her work began with one boy, begging for alms.

Try this: Help one person this week, and do it fully.

3 Give more than food

Her children got schooling, and many became doctors and lawyers.

Try this: When you help, add something that lasts, such as a skill or a lesson.

4 Treat others as your own

She said, “They are not orphans. I am their mother.”

Try this: Care for someone outside your family as you would for your own.

ONE THOUGHT TO TAKE AWAY

She was called a scrap of cloth, and she made a family out of children nobody wanted.

Sources

The Federal
Sindhutai was alone yet she gave new life to more than 2,500 orphans (2022)

British Association of Social Workers
India mourns social worker dubbed ‘mother of orphans’ (2022)

Wikipedia
Sindhutai Sapkal

Fact-check note: The sources agree on the main story and differ on many details, so the story keeps to what at least two of them say. Birth: Wikipedia gives 14 November 1948 in Pipri Meghe, Wardha district; BASW says the village of Pimpri in Maharashtra; The Federal places her struggles in a village in Pune; the story says only “Maharashtra”. Her name “Chindi”: Wikipedia says it means a piece of rag; The Federal says it means a nobody and that her parents wanted a boy; the story says “a scrap of cloth”. Age at marriage and husband’s age: Wikipedia says 12 and about 20 years older; BASW says 12 and 30 years old; The Federal says nine and 20 years older; the story says only that she was married off as a child to a much older man. Her children: The Federal says she was a mother of three by 18 and pregnant with her fourth; BASW says three children by 20 and pregnant with her fourth; Wikipedia says she was forced out at 20 with a daughter; the story says only that she became a mother very young and was thrown out while pregnant (BASW, The Federal). Why she was thrown out: BASW says after she upset a district collector by agitating for justice; The Federal says after she demanded fair wages and respect for women labourers and a landlord spread rumours; Wikipedia says her husband violently forced her out; the story says “for speaking up for justice for others”, which fits the first two. The birth alone, in a cowshed with the cord cut using a stone, is her own account as quoted by The Federal; BASW says she gave birth alone. Begging and sleeping in a crematorium: The Federal and BASW. The boy begging for alms is from The Federal; Wikipedia places her in Chikhaldara, begging, and says she adopted abandoned children; the story’s pins show Wardha (birth district), Chikhaldara and Pune. Giving her own daughter to a trust in Pune to avoid favouritism is from Wikipedia only, so the story attributes it. Number of children: BASW says more than 1,000; Wikipedia says over 1,500; The Federal says more than 2,500; the story says “over a thousand” and “1,000+”, the lowest estimate. Orphanages: The Federal and BASW say four in Maharashtra; Wikipedia lists several homes with different names. “Mai” is in Wikipedia and The Federal. The quotes “They are not orphans. I am their mother.” and “Today my children have become doctors, lawyers and even big officers” are from The Federal, which gives the second, and “When the going gets tough, the tough get going”, in Marathi with an English translation; her special love for girls and her parents’ anger are also from The Federal; BASW says doctors, engineers and chartered accountants. Using award money to buy land is from Wikipedia. The Padma Shri in 2021 is in all three sources. Death on 4 January 2022 in Pune of a heart attack is in Wikipedia and The Federal; her age is given as 73 (Wikipedia, which matches her birth date), 74 (BASW) and 75 (The Federal); the story says no age. Her daughter Mamata’s promise to continue the work is from The Federal. The 2010 film is in Wikipedia and The Federal. We could not open the BBC, The Hindu or Indian Express pages (404) and YourStory (403), and we could not check her

personal account independently, so her words are attributed to The Federal. Lines marked "Our take" are interpretation. Everything else comes from the sources above.