



Global Feminisms:

Comparative Case Studies

of Women's Activism and Scholarship

Interview Transcripts: India

Language: English

Interview Transcripts: India

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**GLOBAL FEMINISMS:
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: INDIA

**Transcript of Shahjehan Aapa
Interviewer: Urvashi Butalia**

**Location: Delhi, India
Date: 30th April, 1-2 May, 2004
Language of Interview: Hindi**



SPARROW

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Shahjehan Aapa, born in 1946, comes from a working class background. Until the death of her daughter Noorjehan, who died due to dowry harassment, Shahjehan Aapa had not thought about working for issues concerning women. Her daughter's death gave her the reason and the courage to venture out of her house seeking justice for her daughter and for many others like her daughter. She is currently the President of Shakti Shalini, a women's organization in Delhi that deals with counseling and redress of grievances.

Urvashi Butalia (the interviewer) is a publisher and an activist. She has been involved with women's and civil liberties groups in Delhi and has been working on gender and communalism, both subjects on which she has written and published widely. There is an interview with her in the "cross-site" collection within the Global Feminisms Project.

Shahjehan Aapa Transcript

Urvashi Butalia¹: Aapa, since when are you living in this house in Nangloi²? Where were you staying earlier?

Shahjehan Aapa: There was a reason to come to Nangloi. We used to stay in Bara Hindu Rao³ in Delhi. After my marriage we came to Bara Hindu Rao. At that time many huts were coming up in Nangloi from various places. Even we got a very cheap plot. So like everyone else even we bought a place over here. We are living here for the last 28 years. My children have spent their growing years here and my daughter got married here. My in-laws' place is actually in Hasanpur⁴, in district Muradabad⁵ and as for my birthplace I was born in Mathura⁶. In Mathura, there is a place called Choti Bazaria, a good locality, now it is called Ghia Mandi, I was born in this place and we just grew up. But in 1947 everything was ruined and India was divided into two; it felt as if they cut up our bodies into two, Pakistan and Hindustan. We do not know what happened to our parents at that time. We two sisters were brought up by other people, whom we treated as our parents and stayed with them. He⁷ got me married to his first wife's son. And I came to Nangloi with him.... I spent 28 years here in Nangloi and it is around this time, my children grew up here, my daughter got married here and it is here that my daughter became a victim of dowry⁸. She died here. I never felt like leaving this place although I am not staying in my own house — it is a rented place — it belongs to someone else. Not that I want to grab it, but I stay here for some reasons. Even my children ask me why I don't like any other place. Even I don't know what attachment I have to this place. I started my work from here and my daughter died here; I started my life from here and this is the reason why I do not feel like leaving Nangloi. My children always say that we should go to some other place, we will get better opportunities for employment. I feel that if I lost things here, I also gained here. I don't feel like leaving Nangloi because I started my life here, doing so many things. My father, who got me

¹ Urvashi Butalia is a publisher and an activist. She has been involved with women's and civil liberties groups in Delhi and has been working on gender and communalism, both subjects on which she has written and published widely.

² A district of Delhi.

³ A district of Delhi.

⁴ A small town with a large Muslim population. Aapa mentions the location of her in-laws house because according to traditional Indian Muslim marriage practices, after the wedding the bride moves in with the family of her husband.

⁵ A district of the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh.

⁶ A city in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, located 145 km south-east of Delhi.

⁷ Father- Referring to her foster father who had two wives. She got married to his first wife's son.

⁸ The dowry movement in India began around 1977 when dowry deaths started being reported initially in North India and then gradually throughout the country. Dowry is a payment made in cash and kind to the bridegroom's family by the bride's parents at the time of the marriage. Traditionally considered a gesture of parent's love, dowry was dependent on parents' economic capacity, and constituted a woman's independent right to property and prestige. Gradually, dowry became something that was forcefully extricated from the bride's parents. The inability to satisfy the demands of the bridegroom's family started the phenomenon of dowry harassment, violence and consequent deaths (murders) of brides at the hands of their in-laws. The various methods used for the murders included poisoning, drowning, strangling, shooting, bludgeoning or burning. During this phase, the late seventies and eighties, women's groups in North India, where the problem of dowry were worse, started protesting against dowry. Gradually women's organisations from all over the country joined the movement. It was during this phase that Shahjehan Aapa's daughter Noorjehan was burnt to death due to insufficient dowry.

married to his own son, was with us. He was both my mother and my father, even he stayed here with us for many years and he died here. Even my mother who brought me up died here, so I feel from within, that my mother is here, my father is here, my daughter is here, even my sons are here, in this soil. I feel this but I don't know what time will dictate.

Urvashi: Aapa, in Mathura, your parents who took care of you, did they send you to school?

Aapa: No, at that time there was no point in sending me to school. I was five years old and I don't remember whether I had been to school or not. But the people who looked after me gave me an education in a Madarsa⁹ not in a school. After going to the Madarsa I got interested in reading the Koran. They'd teach us the ways of roza¹⁰ how to say the namaz¹¹. I felt that after reading the Koransharif¹² if I'm unable to understand it and explain it, it will not do. So, out of my own interest, I enrolled myself in an Urdu¹³ medium school. My father on learning that I got myself admitted to a school asked me why I didn't ask for his permission. He used to send his own daughters to a good school. At times I felt that, had my parents been there they would have sent me to a good school. He told me, "I don't send you to school because anything untoward can happen to you." Somehow he convinced me. I was not admitted to the school where his daughters used to study, but I got myself admitted in a school where the teachers helped me. (...)¹⁴

Urvashi: Aapa, tell us something about your marriage. At what age and how did you get married? How many children did you have and what kind of work have you done?

Aapa: I was married at the age of fourteen. My father got me married at the age of fourteen. My father was highly respected among the relatives and a girl of fourteen years was considered to be in her youth. I don't know what sort of thinking this was, but girls were married at the age of fourteen or fifteen and even I was married when I was fourteen. I told my father that I don't want to get married to this person. He removed his cap and kept it at my feet and said, "My honour is in your hands." So I swallowed my feelings and kept quiet. My husband used to work in the jungle. He was an extremely foul-mouthed person, he would argue, hurl abuses and I used to talk to everyone with a smile. I loved to be playful and talk and laugh with everyone. When I was married I felt very sad and felt trapped inside a cage. His mother used to stay in a village. He took me to the village for some days. They had many buffaloes and cows. I did all that work, milking them, sending the milk to the town — all the work and I had to do it because there was no relative or anyone close who would defend me and question them. They had 14-15 buffaloes and 3-4 cows. I used to do all the work. Picking up the cow dung, smearing it on the floor. I used to feel very repulsed. But I had to do all such work because I was helpless. If I refused to do anything they'd beat me up just the way they beat up the cows and buffaloes. When I could take it no longer I wrote to my father that either you call me back or else you give me poison so that I

⁹ Muslim religious school.

¹⁰ Fasting.

¹¹ Prayers.

¹² The Koran.

¹³ Indian language, also the national language of Pakistan; much like Hindi, but written with a Persian script.

¹⁴ This interview was conducted over several days. This symbol indicates a break in the interview.

can die. I cannot spend my life here. My father came and brought me back. I told my father that you give me freedom from these people or else I will not stay in the village at any cost. Initially he tried to send me back to the village, saying that it is good if a girl earns a good name or her work earns her a good name. I said I don't want any of these, I want to improve the condition of my life; either you arrange for me to leave from here or else I'll arrange for myself. I know how to do hard work. I knew a lot of stitching work and I could easily earn money by working for some person or the other. And in those days even Rs. 1.25 had a lot of importance, I do work for Rs. 2 or Rs. 2 .50 per day. He realised that I didn't want to go back and my condition was not very good. I said that if you are hesitating to keep me with you then I will go to Delhi. I will go back to Delhi. I had no one in Delhi but my sister's marital home was in Delhi. My sister's mother-in-law was a very good woman. When she came to know about my condition she called me and told me, "You come here. I will help you. You will get a lot of stitching jobs and your problem will be solved." So it was through her that I came to Bara Hindu Rao. I didn't have a sewing machine then. My sister's mother-in-law gave me her own machine and said, "Whatever work you want to do you can do with this." I did my work on that machine and then bought my own machine. It is with this that I brought up my kids. At that time people told me that 22 by 22 ½ feet plots are available in Nangloi. In Bara Hindu Rao the rooms were very small. So along with those five brothers I moved to Nangloi as well. (...)

Urvashi: You got married at fourteen and struggled with so many problems at that young age. You even had a family to support. So how many children do you have?

Aapa: Not only did I give birth but also raised them on my own. I had seven sons and two daughters. Whenever I told my husband that I wanted to go for sterilization he refused. It was very difficult for me to bring up so many children. At that time he didn't accept this, and threatened me, if you ever do it I will divorce you. I was helpless at that time and could not even think properly. So, I had seven sons and two daughters. The two younger daughters have been married and the elder daughter has been killed for dowry. I stepped out of the house because of her. Her death and me feeling shattered — that is how Nangloi is known; this is from where I began my work, stepping out. I had worked within the house. But I stepped out to work after my daughter's death. Because at that time I knew about women being tortured at home by men; I thought why should I give in, I had tolerated for many years. After my daughter died I threw away my burqa¹⁵. I stepped out in such a way that my own people refused to recognise me. But if my own deserted me, strangers accepted me. The best thing was that the stains in my life were wiped out and I started working with the people in such a way that I forgot my grief. (...)

Urvashi: Aapa, you decided to fight against dowry after the death of your daughter. Tell us something about that. What happened in Noorjehan's wedding and how did you keep this battle going?

¹⁵ The word burqa can refer to 1.) a veil which is tied on the head, over a headscarf and covers the face except for a slit at the eyes for the woman to see through, or 2.) a garment which covers the entire body and face, where the eyes are covered with a 'net curtain' allowing the woman to see but preventing other people from seeing her eyes.

Aapa: After the marriage and even before the marriage I couldn't spend money like others. I had to budget and spend accordingly. I gave her whatever I could afford. After that her father-in-law, brother-in-law, mother-in-law and elder sister-in-law, started harassing her saying, you can bring money from your mother. She works in a factory, she earns a lot of money and they tortured her a lot. She came to me and told me, "Mummy, if you give me Rs. 7,000 then this will stop." At that time I didn't think about why she is asking for that money, why they are torturing her. I asked the factory owner to give me a loan and I gave it to her. After that I budgeted well to repay this loan and run my household as well. I even returned the money after I invested Rs. 500 in a monthly chit fund. After that once again my daughter came to me and said, "Mummy, whatever things I have cannot be used. They are lying in a dark corner. I feel harassed by my family; there is no door in my house nor is there a staircase to go the terrace. I feel quite hassled; I can't spread out my clothes nor can I dry them." She spoke of many such problems. I told her that I had borrowed from someone and repaid with great difficulty. It's very difficult to repay within such a short time. But her crying affected me. She asked for Rs. 30,000 altogether and said, "Mummy, if you give me this much, then things will be alright in my house." But it was a big amount for me then. I told her that I didn't have that much money to give her. Since I couldn't give her there were fights and other tensions in her house. She used to come to my house, eat food, drink water but she never told me about her harassment and how they tortured her. She thought that my mother is herself working very hard, if I tell her about all this and if something happens to her, there'll be no one to look after the younger brothers and sisters. I couldn't give her Rs. 30,000 and I can't tell you how much tension it caused in her house. She was beaten up badly and at about 12.30 in the afternoon, they poured kerosene on her and burnt her. When she started screaming, people came and told me that your daughter's house is on fire. I did not know then that my daughter herself was being burnt. I was in my house. I had a small child in my lap, about a month old. I had just come from Kalavati Hospital. I left my child in the house and came running. Her brother-in-law held me with both his hands and didn't let me go inside. There was a fire in the house but I didn't know that it was my daughter they were burning. They stopped me outside, but my younger sister pushed everyone aside and ran inside. She saw that there was fire in her room and the girl herself was burning. She started screaming. My sister rolled her in clothes and a quilt. There was not a drop of water in the house and I don't know if it was planned, but all the pots and vessels were empty. No one questioned them about it. At about 2.30, the fire brigade people came and took away her dead body. My son was smart enough to run behind the officer to the police station and say that my sister has been burnt, come immediately. A friend was with him; they weren't very grown up and weren't very smart. Both of them were made to sit in the police station and the police kept saying they were coming. But my younger son did a very good thing. There used to be a fire brigade vehicle standing always during June-July-August for an emergency fire, so he went and got a vehicle and took his sister to the hospital, thinking she might survive. At that time he must be eleven years old. My children were very young but were doing all the running around and I, the wretched mother, was just standing and watching. They were holding me so tight that I fainted over there and I don't know what happened after that. After that they dumped me in my house. After witnessing this struggle I was in agony that my daughter was burnt alive and there was no point in my sitting at home after my daughter was burnt. She was burnt today, tomorrow someone else may be burnt. With these thoughts I started my battle. I gheraoed¹⁶ the police station at Nangloi. It was my first gherao. Then her body came to the police station. We did a big protest and there was a lot of

¹⁶ Gherao means to protest noisily, to surround, or to mob. It is usually used as a verb but can also be a noun.

stone throwing. The police did lathi charge¹⁷ on us, but we blocked the road totally and did not stop. We blocked traffic on both sides. Police started assuring us saying, ‘Don’t worry, your F.I.R.¹⁸ has been filed. We are arresting them.’ I wanted those five people arrested. At that time people did me a big “favour” by keeping my enemies safely inside the police station. There was no report against them, and no investigation against them. That dharna¹⁹ of blocking the police station was the first dharna of my life. But when I reached the police station I saw thousands of people and that boosted my morale. I thought so many people are with me. I didn’t know then that many come just to watch. At that time I didn’t even think of such a thing. I thought that if so many people are with me I will be able to do anything. After that the S.P.²⁰ came and told me to take the body away. He told me not to waste its soil. So we took the body and buried it. But the F.I.R had been written in such a way that wherever I took it I realised that there was nothing in it to prove and get them arrested. It was written that the girl was very unhappy and had committed suicide. My question was, if she was unhappy and had committed suicide, why did she do it? What was the reason and why did she do it in your house and why didn’t she do it in my house if she was unhappy?

Urvashi: Aapa, you told me about the F.I.R., it was written that she had killed herself. How did it happen? Who wrote it?

Aapa: This was done by the police inspector who wrote the F.I.R. and the copy given to us was the sixth copy and there were many things that were very unclear. We showed it to a few very good lawyers and we came to know that there was nothing apart from the fact that the girl had committed suicide and an extra allegation was that her brother had given her the kerosene.

Urvashi: Okay...

Aapa: This was a big thing but we were not aware of all this at that time. It was very common in those days to have kerosene at home. Stoves were there in every house. It wasn’t as if we had given her kerosene to burn herself. I can’t tell you what a simple, truthful and honest girl she was. I remember every little thing about her. I went to the court with that F.I.R. My case went on for three years in the Tees Hazari court²¹. But let those people prosper who bribed the police and I wish that they too must go through what I am going through, at least this will open many eyes. The inspector who wrote this report fought with me once. He said, “Your daughter died and now you roam around to die yourself, someday somebody will shoot you, then you will remember.” I too fought with him. But in those days it was very difficult to file an F.I.R. The important thing was that they had bribed the police. Rajaram’s man was a police informer and he passed money to the police. That is why nothing happened in that case and I ran around for three years in the court with my daughter’s case. Nandita Haksar²², who knew a lot of well-known lawyers and is

¹⁷ A *lathi* is a heavy stick (often bamboo) bound with iron and used by Indian police. Lathi charge is when police attempt to break up groups of demonstrators using their lathis.

¹⁸ F.I.R. is the abbreviated form of First Information Report. It is the information recorded by the police officer on duty, given either by the aggrieved person or any other person about the commission of an alleged offence. On the basis of the F.I.R. the police commence the investigation.

¹⁹ A sit-in demonstration.

²⁰ Superintendent of Police.

²¹ A court in Delhi.

²² A prominent human rights activist and Supreme Court attorney.

herself a lawyer, took that case from there to the court. Around the same time another incident occurred with me in my locality, in my C-block. I have mentioned about that girl Shanti from Rajasthan, who was thrown from the third floor. I was deeply hurt after looking at her case and I got totally immersed in her case and could not make it for the dates of my own case and thus my case was closed.

Urvashi: Noorjehan's case, because you got involved in Shanti's case...

Aapa: Yes, because I realised that Shanti was still alive and my daughter was dead. It was difficult to fight for a dead person and a lot of running around was involved whereas this girl was an example, she was very much alive and was herself giving witness. People were to be punished according to her witness. So I used to run around a lot for her case. I did not even have money at that time. I was a working woman. I worked hard the whole day and in the evening I used to feed my children. I spread my pallu²³ and begged for money and fought her case. (...)

Urvashi: Isn't it a beautiful name, Shahjehan? Aapa came later²⁴.

Aapa: Any small word coming out of one's own house, from our children's love becomes more popular, Aapa seemed a small name and people connected with it very easily. And even today people coming to my house call me Aapa. (...)

Urvashi: Yes, even we have been calling you Aapa from the very beginning.

Aapa: Aapa it has been. (...)

Urvashi: Aapa, after what happened to your daughter and after you started working against dowry, were you alone or were you attached to any organisation?

Aapa: No, when this incident occurred with my daughter I was alone. There was no organisation. At that time I was not aware of anything like organisation and didn't know that people were coming together like this and working. I didn't know any of these things. But when my daughter died I had to protest in front of Nangloi police station and when people saw that a woman who had never stepped out and is today sitting in front of the police station and a lot of noise is going on, thousands of people started collecting.

When I saw thousands of people around me I no longer felt lonely; I felt as if the world was with me. I raised my daughter's issue and began my work, although honestly speaking there has been no justice for my daughter. I fought the case for three years. But the enemies were never presented in the court. But a number of cases of my locality came to me, the girls for whom I had to do a lot of running around. And I had to live with this solace in my heart that it could be my Noorjehan, it could be any girl, all girls — they are all my daughters. I have to do whatever I can for them for my own peace. The first thing I did in my locality was to form a Mahila Samiti²⁵ against dowry along with 25 women. There were no computers or typewriters then. We kept

²³ The portion of a sari which is draped diagonally in the front.

²⁴ The term "Aapa" among the Indian and Pakistani Muslims means elder sister. Butalia is referring to the fact that Shahjehan Aapa was not always called "Aapa."

²⁵ A women's group or committee.

registers of each case history along with the photographs and then started the work. The first case was from Rajasthan, Jaipur. For Shanti I fought a very long battle because that girl was thrown down from the terrace and both her legs were broken. We also collected the money for her medical expenses and gave her treatment. While fighting this case, I achieved success and got inspired. I have worked a lot for my Nangloi locality girls. One girl was lured into the temple and raped. Then we did a gherao and got the culprits arrested. From then I thought that whatever I could do for the people in my country, in my locality, maybe would make people aware, they will know, they will be able to do something for girls; people will start talking about equality for girls. When I registered Dahej Virodhi Samiti²⁶ Nandita Haskar, Shardaben were with me and I got a chance to go to each and every locality and even today I have very good relationship with the people from various localities; when I go to these localities people respect me. I help them in their work. My work has spread from my locality, I have started my work from my locality. My husband was very much against my work but my father-in-law was with me, and he said, my daughter is not working for only her daughter, she is working for lakhs²⁷ of daughters. His confidence increased my strength. He was both my father-in-law and my father for me, because he had brought me up. And so my confidence increased and I got the courage to enter any locality; my days were divided between the various localities. On Monday and Sunday I used to work in my own locality, the rest of the days I was either in Jahangirpuri or Sundernagari or Nandnagari²⁸ and I started work in many other localities too. I would go there and spend the whole day. At that time, people were not so organised but yes, in the eighties when the women's movement came as a storm, we joined it. We met many mothers, whose daughters were burnt, some were killed through accidents and some were killed in other ways, these mothers also came together. And we gained a lot of what we had lost from this women's movement. Then, I felt that I should do something more, just working in and around my locality won't be enough and I went for training to Benaras²⁹ for twenty-two days and I completed that training. During this work there was one case of a man, a very bad case. We had filed a FIR in the police station but we didn't know that the man was an informer. He filed a complaint against us claiming that we go to various localities and provoke women and teach them. Right in the morning they go out with their bags and create trouble in the locality...he had raised many issues. We had some serious confrontations with the police but I wasn't scared. There was only one thing in my mind that if I had the spirit and was conscious about the work then we would never be unsuccessful, we would always be successful. We went to the SHO³⁰, then to the SP and then, the DSP³¹, and told him that there has been a wrong complaint against us and these are the very people who do the wrong things in the locality. This is how I came to know the police. People now thought a little before filing an FIR because they knew that this woman would go to the police station and start protesting and make our lives miserable. People used to call me a bad woman but that never affected me, in fact I felt very good because I felt that even if I earned a bad name, in some way or the other it would help my work. I observed in our locality that the most talked about people were the wrong doers and I was after all fighting for rights, so if anyone wished to call me bad, they could, it wouldn't affect me. So, I faced a lot of difficulty like this. There were many

²⁶ Aapa's anti-dowry organization.

²⁷ A unit in a traditional number system still widely used in India, equal to a hundred thousand.

²⁸ Low-income districts of Delhi.

²⁹ Benaras, also called Varanasi, is a city located in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh.

³⁰ Station House Officer.

³¹ Deputy Superintendent of Police.

obstacles in the way of my work but I never stepped back. From where I worked, I started identifying women who didn't have money in the area of my work. People in my locality had a very low income and used to toil from morning to night. For them I wanted to arrange some free [consultation]. I needed some lawyers who would help us and work without payment and we got some lawyers like that. These girls helped me to succeed although I had to spend some money too, for their medical expenses, if they have an injury or something like that. While doing this work one thing that happened was I could step out of my veil and secondly the news spread that there was a Satanic woman in the locality. I saw this image of a Satan succeed. Today when there is any issue in my locality the women raise many questions and that gives me immense peace. (...)

Urvashi: But Aapa, you were a woman who wore burqa. You had never stepped out of the house; then how did you turn into a lioness?

Shahajen: I have to tell you that when I first became conscious, I felt that I should not wear the burqa and move out. I felt that I wouldn't be able to do my work properly if I did not remove my burqa because some people will identify with me and some won't. But if I remove my burqa then everyone will be able to identify with me and so I removed my burqa. People in my house were the first ones to oppose me. They asked me, why I removed my burqa, have I become shameless, didn't I feel anything? But I could have had feelings only if there was some humanity among human beings. I was constantly confronting wolves. To fight with these lions I had to become a lioness. From a lamb I became a lioness and I gathered all my strength and kept working. Even now I'm not scared of anyone. You should have a lot of strength and courage to do anything. Balancing your consciousness and enthusiasm gets your work done. This is the way I have always worked. (...) I feel that we were successful in this because today women do not hesitate to come out and fight for their rights. They demand their rights. Along with this we have divided the days in our locality for legal consultation. Someday the lawyer goes to a particular area, the other days he will go to another locality, give the people advice, he will tell you about the exact rights you should fight for. So I have done these workshops too and continue to do so. In whichever locality I feel the need I conduct a workshop. There are at least 30 women wherever we go and we do our workshops with them.

Urvashi: What kind of workshops do you conduct?

Aapa: Our workshops are of three different types. One workshop is where we have lawyers giving legal advocacy, wherein they tell you how we can fight using (IPC) Section 125³² or how (IPC) Section 498³³ can be used to fight against dowry related cases or what you can get with (IPC) Section 496³⁴ and how you can fight for your various rights — all this legal advice is given. The other workshop is for building unity among ourselves. We discuss when and where to meet. If a woman is friendly with five women they will come with her. We are twenty-five of us; even if we bring along five women each we can have a workshop right there. So it is quite normal to find hundred women in one workshop. Another workshop that we conduct is where we discuss about what work is being done in our locality and what is not. Sometimes there are

³² (IPC) Section 125 of the Indian Penal Code deals with cases related to women seeking maintenance.

³³ (IPC) Section 498 of the Indian Penal Code deals with cases related to cruelty and violence.

³⁴ (IPC) Section 496 of the Indian Penal Code deals with cases related to matrimonial offence of bigamy

problems regarding electricity, water, sometimes roads are not proper or sometimes some outsider comes to the locality and starts harassing people, he comes from outside and starts behaving in a rough manner, drinks alcohol, engages in anti-social activities, so we fight against all this too and have workshops. This is our battle. We do these three workshops. Whenever we go on any morcha³⁵, in one place or the other, we have to go to the police station and we discuss about how one should file an F.I.R. We fight legal battles and take help to fight them. We had an acute water problem in our locality. So one day we had a big meeting and decided what should be done. The problem was so acute and how many doors would people knock for water. And what should be done about it. So one day we collected all the old pots and went in front of Netaji's house and started shouting "Netaji, hai hai! Hai hai!"³⁶ Netaji said, "From where have these women come, they are so ill-mannered." We said, "We are not ill-mannered, we have come to break these pots on your head because there is no water in our locality. Either you arrange for water supply to our locality or we break these pots in front of your house." There were a few of us who did not actually break the pots but some women who were really angry started breaking the pots and when a few of them started, hundreds joined in breaking the pots. There were around 250 to 300 women there and the water problem was acute. The water supply started immediately from both the Ganga and Yamuna rivers. (...) A woman's courage is a big thing and if she cannot gather enough of it then she cannot achieve anything. If you are kicked around in your house and you tolerate it, if you get some food you eat or else you go to bed hungry. If you have the courage you get out, earn for yourself and fight for your rights. The most important thing in this fight is that a woman acquires strength and courage. In my locality now 90% of the women are working. Earlier they cried all the time and if I asked them why, they would say they had not eaten for two or three days. I would ask them, "Why don't you work? Do something, look for something, you'll find it." They'd say that their husbands would not allow. I'd say, "Kick your husband, once you start working within a day or two, you will yourself move ahead." Today 90% of the women are working.

Urvashi: Whenever a woman comes out of her house onto the roads, the society points fingers and starts calling her a fallen woman. Did you face something similar?

Aapa: A lot of it. So much that although all the other wounds have healed this wound has not. There were many big and famous people in the society who spoke ill of me. They said that if she could come and talk against her own people then she shouldn't be kept at home. But I wasn't afraid of anyone. Okay, I might be a bad woman, a fallen woman, whatever I was but I was fighting for the rights of women. If some people don't like it let them cover their faces. I've uncovered, you can cover your faces. I'm not afraid and if I have to confront anyone I will do so. And I can question anyone. But today the same people who spoke ill of me come to me with other girls, their own girls. Today I feel that whatever I did was not wrong, it was right but then these people felt that a woman in purdah³⁷ stepping out meant that she must be a fallen woman.

³⁵ Protest.

³⁶ In public protests the term "hai hai" is often used to mean "down" with a particular person or leader. The expression is also much used by the "hijra", the cross-dressing trans-gender community in India, where it also attains a sexual connotation.

³⁷ Purdah is the practice that includes the seclusion of women from public observation by wearing concealing clothing from head to toe and by the use of high walls, curtains, and screens erected within the home. Purdah is practiced by Muslims and by various Hindus, especially in India.

She must be characterless, if she goes to the police station, one must also consider the kind of things that happened in the police station. (...)

Urvashi: But what were the allegations?

Aapa: What didn't they say? A lot was said, I don't want to repeat all that. I suffered a great deal because I removed my purdah. My husband used to keep me out of the house quite often at night. He used to say that if you can roam the whole day without your purdah then you can go and rest somewhere else at night too. Anyway, that time passed too. I never got scared. I would sit at my door but I never went to any other person's door. I never knocked anyone's door asking to be taken in for the night. I thought that if someone came and questioned me I would stand right there and speak. So I stood there. I was accused of being a fallen woman, of being characterless, who goes to courts and other offices. But I was never scared. I thought let them talk — it is their mouths they use. And many times I was beaten up for that. One day he hit me saying, "Aren't you ashamed, you go to courts and police stations?" I said, "Aren't you ashamed that you stay at home and still can't take care of the house, how will you go out and help anybody else?" I was very angry that day. He used to beat me every day. That day I beat him up too. After that our fights decreased. Then he stopped talking with me. He used to say, "I don't want to talk to you." I said okay; it only made me happy. "You earn for yourself, enjoy your life. I will earn for myself enjoy my life." I didn't like it but we lived together in the same house. But it was very difficult to tolerate what outsiders said. If someone from your family says something, you can explain, you can threaten, you can pacify but outsiders always speak in an exaggerated manner. I was not scared of them too. I began dealing with them physically, "If you speak ill of me, I won't spare you, bring proof of my wrong doings." (...)

Urvashi: Aapa, just now you were saying that after you stepped out from your home and started working you faced lots of problems but some people were with you. So were your daughters and sons with you in your work? Do you see a change in them?

Aapa: My main aim was to change myself and my family. I felt that if there was a change in my family it would encourage a change in at least ten people. My actual aim was not to take revenge but to bring about a change in my family — my daughters-in-law, my daughter, now I have only one daughter. There was a lot of change in my family. Today, my daughters-in-law are educated, they have the courage to go out to work, and the problem of wearing burqa is not there. Whenever I am not there they attend to things immediately and never refuse saying, our mother-in-law is not there. Even if they have to go to the police station they go. If an F.I.R. has to be filed they go immediately with others. (...)

Urvashi: Aapa, when your daughters-in-law came to your house were they wearing hijab³⁸?

Aapa: Yes, they did.

Urvashi: Did they take it off because of you?

³⁸ Head and body covered according to Islamic code.

Aapa: Because of me and because of my work. Many a time they had to go to the police station when I was not there. They would call me and ask me that such a case has come and what should we do because it will take you time to reach here. I told them that you go with them and get their work done. They told me, “We feel shy to go in our burqa.” I told them, “Go without your burqa, it is not necessary.” They said, “What about your sons?” I told them I’ll talk to my sons. But my sons didn’t question me. I’m not lying when I say this. Had I asked them they would have said, “Like you they also have removed it.” Today their own parents don’t say anything. In their maternal home everybody wears burqa but my daughters-in-law don’t. They go about without burqa. (...)

Urvashi: Aapa, tell us about the school you started for Muslim children in Nangloi. When and why did you start it? How is it functioning now?

Aapa: It is working well, both the schools are working quite well. The reason why I started this school was that a section in our locality — the labourers — do not pay any attention to their children’s education. If the mother is also working then she leaves the younger children with the eldest daughter. These girls cannot study. Some boys are admitted and can study but girls’ education was not considered important. It is for this reason that I ran around so much to open two schools. My daughters-in-law and my sons did a survey and I made them do it because we did not have money to pay anyone. This survey was to find the number of girls of school-going age, their age group and their literacy rate. We found that 90% of the girls were illiterate. When we started surveying our own locality we found out that the girls had to be sent to C-block, D-block for their schooling and that area was not very safe. This was the reason why parents did not send their daughters to school. So the girls were educated till the fourth or fifth class and then made to sit at home. I was worried that these girls were not studying beyond that. People also told me that we do not have the resources to send our daughters to your private school because we are labourers. I said okay; after finishing the survey I made the system of two schools, one school was where the children of C-block, E-block, G-block will come to study and another school for the children of A-block. (...) In both schools the proportion of children studying is equal. In one school we have started the system of teaching Arabic too so that Muslims don’t feel that we are not giving them religious education. We have allotted some time for teaching in Arabic but we stress Hindi and English as the medium of teaching. We were worried about the exact functioning of the school and I decided to appoint Rina Banerjee as the Director and told her, “Rina, for this you have to do the entire running around.” I told her that I live in this area and I wish from the bottom of my heart that no girl remains uneducated because the girls who live in this locality are all my daughters and I want people to remember even after my death that I did not leave a single stone unturned for the cause of the education of these girls. We opened a school by the name of Nav Srishti³⁹. We gave a new name, made a new world, a small new world and started a school for kids and today if you ask me about the education in these schools I can tell you that forty girls from these schools have completed their education and are teaching in these schools. We decided on a very important issue about jobs for the girls who were completing their education. They would not get jobs so easily so we decided that we will start a new branch and employ ten girls from among them as teachers over there. Another five we will send somewhere and another five will be sent to some other place. This will enable 40 girls to stand on their feet. Some of them have completed their B.A., some of them have enrolled for

³⁹ A school that brings non-formal education to girls in some Delhi slum areas.

M.A. I feel very happy. They do computer courses, typing courses and today they have moved ahead of us. I feel very happy when I think that there will be no illiterate child in my country from my locality. (...)

Urvashi: Aapa, whatever work has been done on the issue of dowry so far by women's organizations, by the government, what do you think has been lacking?

Aapa: Whatever women's organizations did, they did according to their ideas and what the government did was to hand it over to the police. Our demand from the very beginning has been to have women officers in the dowry cell. They will have a similar mindset like us when we are trying to help a girl, they will think like us. But there is a lot of difference between the training that they receive and the training that we receive. Even today if we take the issue of dowry items being returned to the girl, the girl never gets anything back. To cover these loopholes we need maximum help of the police because there are only two issues to be sorted and not hundred, the first issue is about the return of the dowry items and the second issue is about filing a court case. The court will decide what is to happen, the police cannot even help us to get back the dowry and don't even want to take the case to the court. They take years. And that is why the greatest shortcoming is with the police. They don't allow women's organisations that are fighting, to move ahead. The women's organisations are making all efforts to ensure the return of the dowry and also the return of a lump sum amount to the girl, but there has been no such effort from the government. (...) If a girl goes to court, they keep giving dates for hearing again and again. As for section 125 I can prove that girls who are fighting their cases for so many years, there are some whose cases have gone on for eleven years. The court passes the order but they don't get their money back. Why does this happen? Why can't they arrest him? Why is the money not given? They force the girl to go back to the house, they pull her by her hand and take her to the house even if there is a danger to her life. The question is why do they force her to go back to the house? The girls feel that their life is in danger. Even after they switch on the gas, or try to douse her with oil, if the girl has saved herself and escaped, the police still ask her why she doesn't go back, and make her home there. Another shameless thing they say is, "If you don't warm his bed at night, why will he keep you?" How can they ask such a disgusting question, it is a matter of great shame. The girls who have come to me, I feel very sad that they got neither justice nor their things.

Urvashi: Aapa, there is one question in my mind. In your work, you are repeatedly talking about the role of law like the need to go to court, to retrieve the dowry, file a report with the police and other things but at the same time you talk about the futility of law and how it has not helped at all in such cases.

Aapa: I call it bogus because we don't get anything out of law. After fighting a case for seven years or sometimes eleven years, a girl loses heart and is forced to withdraw and sit at home. During the dates for hearings either the judge won't be there, or the lawyers won't be there or else there will be a strike. Who has heard of a woman's strike? Who has seen her problems? Why can't they see? This is the reason why my blood boils everytime I look at the legal situation and we feel that the girl is not getting justice anywhere; the ones who don't deserve get everything and they get it fast, because money is involved. Whenever the police get money, they finish the work quickly and with people like us they'll keep the work pending. Either keep

waiting in the court or keep waiting in the Dowry Cell. So where is the pressure of law, why aren't the guilty arrested? Why aren't they presented in the court? What is happening with the Muslim girls? There is freedom for a man to marry four times, eight times. They say this about the Muslims. But what about the Hindus, is it any less among them? (...) The question goes very deep. We have demands from both the law and dowry cells because our daughters are not getting anything. In the whole country. Whatever is happening is wrong. The police ruin all the cases because of bribes and the girls suffer. The judicial process should become faster. It should exert pressure so people cannot accept bribes. They take money from the man's family and do what they feel.

Urvashi: Aapa, tell us, through this struggle did you meet someone who has influenced you or whose thoughts have illuminated your life?

Aapa: I met such a person in my life. Although Nandita Haksar is a very well known lawyer — she is very rich too — but she has no conceit at all. She explained things to me very clearly when I stepped out. I keep her in my heart like a lover would do in a romantic love story. I am very happy with her. At every turning point, for any work. When I came out in the beginning Nandita was with me. She helped me like a younger sister, I was the elder sister but it was the other way. It was I who held the younger sister's hand and walked on the roads where the elder sister normally leads. I'm very happy with her. I always pray for her happiness wherever she is.

Urvashi: How did you meet Nandita?

Aapa: It was a chance meeting. All of us were standing in front of the police station and protesting for a case. Her husband was a reporter in *Hindustan Times*, and she was also doing some work for them. She came and asked me where I lived because I was screaming so much. I told her where I lived. "I'll come to your house," she said. I told her to promise. She said, "I'll definitely come." From that day we became very close friends. She came to my house the next day. There has always been a lot of affection between us and even between my children and her. I keep asking her advice when cases come up. She tells me, "You advise everyone and still you ask me." And then she tells me what to do. I go by that. In the light of this world I have found a diamond and that is Nandita Haksar. She has influenced me a lot. She is so precious that one can't afford to lose her. Shardaben was also with us, Gauri Chaudhary⁴⁰ was also with us, and all because of Nandita Haksar. She introduced me to so many people. This is why I have been with her and will always be and keep her in my heart till I die. I'll never forget her.

Urvashi: Aapa, tell us something about Shakti Shalini, you have been there from the very beginning. When was it started, how many people are there today, what kind of work are you doing?

⁴⁰ Member of Action India, a non-governmental organization that focuses primarily on serving individuals with HIV/AIDS.

Aapa: Shakti Shalini was established nearly eighteen to nineteen years ago and both of us — myself and Satyarani⁴¹ — have been associated with it from the very beginning. Both of us are working together. But the people who worked earlier, some of them couldn't do this work and left and today we have a staff of thirteen people. We are going to complete eighteen years and are stepping in the nineteenth year and the working methodology has been that we offer counselling, do follow up of other cases, girls whose cases are not being accepted anywhere, we take those up and if there is a girl who is harassed by her family, by the society or is a rape victim we have a shelter home for them in Shakti Shalini. They stay over there, they are educated and even taught typing. They are taken care of in such a way that they don't feel that they have no one in this world. There are many girls here who are appearing for their 10th and 12th exams in the open school system and are doing various courses depending on what they like. They are helped to acquire training for the kind of work they want to do and some of them are even sent for jobs and we stay in touch with them till the point they are totally independent and have some sort of arrangement for their stay. It also depends on the girl whether she wants to stay in touch with us for five years and more. Even if we send them for some other work we stay in touch. We call them and ask them about their work and if everything is going smoothly, how the money is being used, if she has any bank balance. Now, in this, there are many issues involved. For example, a woman may have children; so even these children are educated by us. There are children who don't have any parents, we send these kids to homes where they can be educated and looked after. It's not that once they are kept somewhere we don't enquire after them, we are constantly in touch and it is the same with the girls. Even if a girl goes back to her marital home after a settlement we keep in touch with her. We ask her to come to the office on a pre-planned day every month. So we call them every month for the first three months and later give a break of two months. We also call her separately to ask her whether her in-laws are behaving properly with her. If the girl tells us that she is absolutely all right, we call her once in six months. There are also some girls who come to us as destitutes, who have been left in Delhi with no family. Sometimes the police bring them and sometimes some organisations bring them. Even these girls are educated and most of the times they wish to work, we give them work and also try to help them to get jobs. We see where she gets the job, consider whether the locality is safe — all these things are looked into. There are also some girls who don't want to work and tell us to look for a nice family and get them married. So we are doing this work also. We have conducted many marriages and we are still in touch with them and whenever there is any festival or if they are in some difficulty we go there or call them here. They come here during festivals like Raksha Bandhan⁴², Diwali⁴³ and Dassera⁴⁴ and there is a constant give and take between us. In these eighteen years of Shakti Shalini, we have sent many girls back to their homes, and some cases are still going on. Even we are quite worried — some cases are going on for five years, some for three years. There are also some girls, whose families don't wish to educate them, and they are always harassed; those girls are also educated here. And we help them in whatever they want to do or whatever they want to study.

⁴¹ Satyarani Chadha is the co-founder of Shakti Shalini, and also came into the anti-dowry movement after her daughter was burnt to death due to dowry demands. Satyarani waged a long legal battle to punish her daughter's in-laws but she has not succeeded.

⁴² This festival is celebrated on the full-moon day in the month of Sravana (July-August). On this day, sisters tie an amulet, the Rakhi, around the right wrist of their brothers praying for their long life and happiness.

⁴³ This Festival of Lights, celebrated in October-November, spans three days and marks the advent of winter.

⁴⁴ This popular 10-day festival, also known as Navaratri, is celebrated in September-October. The Goddess Durga is worshiped for Navaratri (nine nights), and on the 10th day - Vijayadasami Goddess Saraswati is worshiped.

Urvashi: How many women are there in your ashraya⁴⁵ or shelter now?

Aapa: We have seventeen women. There are more girls and not so many old women. We have seventeen girls here whose age ranges from eighteen to thirty-five and about twelve children are there with them.

Urvashi: How do you manage to arrange for all that you require for the food and other things and also to run this organisation?

Aapa: We have received a grant from the Government of India for our shelter home. Some expenses like education are also managed by donations. The government provides for their food and earlier we used to get only Rs. 7 per woman; now it has been increased to Rs. 25 per woman. The government provides for their food and shelter but when the girls want to study further or undertake some training or do some work then we rely on donations. There are many people who give donations for these girls for their education, for some programme or for a trip. We take them out once or twice in a year so that they don't feel that if their parents, relatives or brothers or sisters were there they would have taken them out. We find out where they wish to go and then we go to that place. There are also some small children whom we have admitted in private schools. We pay their fees and are teaching them and small children cannot be separated from their mothers; so we keep them with their mothers. (...)

Urvashi: Aapa, you told me that you and Satyaraniji were with Shakti Shalini from the beginning. Tell us how you became a part of it. Was it your idea to open a shelter home or did someone else ask you to participate in it, how did it all happen?

Aapa: When I worked in bastis⁴⁶ many shelterless women come to me with their cases. I didn't have any solution for this and there was no way I could create a shelter for them. Suddenly one day, Satyaji, Gauri Chaudhary, and others told me that some organisation is going to have a meeting where they are going to call all such mothers and that I should go there. One day in the beginning when they were at Pamposh Enclave⁴⁷, I couldn't trace them. After searching the whole day I went back, because I didn't have their number with me. But there was also no board over there. I thought that at least there would be a board over there and I'll find them. Afterwards Gauri gave me the address of that place, I went and met them. And there was Viji Srinivasan⁴⁸ who was working there. She helped us and then I and Satyarani, we were together from the very beginning and the meeting took place before us and we initiated this work.

Urvashi: Aapa, around ten years earlier in 1995, we and other thousands of women had gone to China for the big Beijing conference, do you remember?

Aapa: Yes, of course I remember.

⁴⁵ Shelter.

⁴⁶ Poor neighborhoods or informal settlements.

⁴⁷ A district in Delhi.

⁴⁸ The late Director of Adithi, an organisation which initiates creative and practical projects for women in India's poorest state, Bihar. Ms. Srinivasan passed away on June 13 2005.

Urvashi: Will you tell us about some of your experiences? How you went and the preparations before you went.

Aapa: Before we went there, we felt that maybe we won't reach there, how would we go, what would happen. We weren't sure of anything, where would we stay —those people don't understand our language, we don't understand their language, what would happen to us. So Satyarani and I had gone there. When we sat in the flight we felt that we'll reach now and there was no doubt about it. Whatever the problem we'll deal with it there. Women from various parts of the world had come there and seeing their experiences, we realised that women were facing problems everywhere. Initially we felt that only in our country, there were problems and struggles. But we realised that women are being oppressed everywhere. (...)

Urvashi: Aapa, since the day you started this battle and the turning point at which you are now, it has been a long journey. When you look back now have you achieved something, learnt something? What do you feel? Was it a good experience?

Aapa: When we talk of experiences, I feel mine was a very worthy experience. I got a chance to learn a lot and also to bring people on the right path. We know that it was impossible for women to step out of the house but today it is possible and now we are walking as equals. At one time it was considered a big thing to stand with men and talk as their equals. It was difficult for a woman to ask, who are you, from where have you come, what are you doing? But today she walks along with him shoulder to shoulder. Today when I look back at my journey I feel that there will be a time when all the daughters, sisters and the girls, will learn much better things than us and will do much better things than us and move ahead. And today in a family if there is discrimination between a boy and girl, they will bring unity and they will learn a way to manage a family and will teach others too; the same way we have brought our lives to a new point. I won't say, it has been a very long journey; it has been about 25-26 years. I feel that whatever I have achieved is what I had lost in my childhood and in my youth — I got it all back in my old age and I have learnt a lot. I'm very happy within. But after my time whether my children or the daughters of this country will be happy is for them to decide. I feel that all the daughters in the country are my daughters. Even if I have to give my blood for them at this age, I won't hesitate and I will never stop toiling for them. (...) Feminism, women's perspective, women's movement are all very important issues for us. It is not the question of the woman alone, it is also the question of the man. We should take each step after taking into consideration the fact that we don't want to divide, we want to unite everyone. We want to walk together at the same time. It is not just a question of our moving ahead. Women's movement has been an important word and in order to gain from it I have myself used it many times. And many people have questioned it. I've always accepted it as the truth and use it with honesty, wisdom and deep gratitude. We're not raising just one issue, there are men with us; our daughters and sons are with us. If we consider schools, colleges and everything else and use the word judiciously, then unity will become the biggest strength we possess. Women's movement is my life, the most important issue of my life. (...) At the end of it all, one day people will come and put me away, but the best thing is, many discussions will arise. People will say this woman has raised so many different issues. If ten people praise ten others will criticise. I won't feel bad about it at all. I accept that and I am

thankful that this women's movement began and that I was a part of it. And most of all I am very happy and I am with everyone in this happiness.

The End

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS:
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: INDIA

**Transcript of Flavia Agnes
Interviewer: Madhushree Datta**

Location: Mumbai, Maharashtra, India

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Flavia Agnes, born in 1947, is a women's rights lawyer and writer and has been actively involved in the women's movement for the last two decades. She has written extensively on issues of domestic violence, feminist jurisprudence and minority rights. Her books are widely acclaimed and are popular among advocates, paralegal workers, law students and women who have been victims of domestic violence. Currently she co-ordinates the legal centre of MAJLIS and is also engaged in her doctoral research on Property Rights of Married Women with the National Law School of India.

Madhushree Dutta (the interviewer) is a cultural activist who programs the cultural activities of Majlis, a legal action group in Mumbai. She is also a documentary film-maker who has made some notable films.

Flavia Agnes Transcript

Madhu: How many times you have given the interview? How do you feel? Have you ever thought that your life will become such a text?

Flavia: Well, not before but after I came into the Women's Movement, yes, I thought it would be quite dramatic.

Madhu: You knew that these had the potential.

Flavia: When I wrote my first autobiography, yes, that text would be dramatic.

Madhu: So now you are going to start one more of such session going through your life.

Flavia: Yeah. But I didn't think that it was that dramatic. I just thought it will be dramatic, the whole story of human interest. (...)

Madhu: Flavia, you often talk about some hills in Mangalore⁴⁹. Where are the hills in Mangalore? Can you talk about it? Now how do you look at it?

Flavia: Yeah. Actually they were not hills, they were rocks but I still imagine the rocks so huge, that you had to climb, on top of the rocks and the vast fields. And you have to cross the fields. And across the fields was my aunt's house. It was such a long journey from the house that I grew up which is my grandmother's house. There is a whole coconut grove. You cross the coconut grove, climb up the rocks and then climb down and cross these rice paddy fields and then climb, there was another slope to climb up and then reach my aunt's house. And according to me, it was such a long journey and it used to take me so long to reach there. And it was quite an exciting journey. Climbing up, climbing down. And there was a stream and across the stream there was a bridge. You can't call it a bridge. It was the coconut tree put there. Sort of balance through that. Sometimes in the rainy season, the stream would be a river actually. It would be over flowing. It was still a lot of exciting journey. (...)

Madhu: So much of out-migration is there, as you were saying in Mangalore. So in that sense, the very fact that you are brought up by your aunt and not in the family with parents and siblings, must have been quite a common thing?

Flavia: Yeah. It was not uncommon, let's say. There were a lot of other people were brought up by their aunts and grandparents. In fact, in my family, what was strange was we are a family of six children and only I was left there. So in a way I was different from my own family. So I grew up in seclusion so to say. Since not the whole family was left behind. And even that happens. You give one child to a sister, you give one child to your mother to raise. (...) But somewhere deep inside me, I didn't like the way, I was being raised. I hated, it in fact. Longed for my

⁴⁹ Mangalore: a district of Karnataka, a state in South India.

mother. Longed to be in a family. As and when my mother came, she didn't accept me as her daughter. She felt I was the outsider. And from every side, from my father, from my mother, from my aunt, I grew up hearing this statement that "Be careful. Girls brought up by aunts go astray." I kept asking them then why am I being raised by my aunt if I am destined to go astray? Then I should be in a proper family, where I won't go astray." So there is this, "Don't make this thing come true." So that has somewhere remained within me — a desire to prove against that statement. (...)

Madhu: So all these things created a kind of alienation from your parents and siblings?

Flavia: Yeah. It did. In every sense. In the culture, in the language. I consider myself totally the daughter of the soil of Karnataka⁵⁰, speaking Kannada⁵¹, speaking Tulu. (...) So I am very much part of the traditional culture. Whereas my siblings, except my elder sister, who grew up for a short period with me, are totally brought up in a western culture. They don't speak Konkani. They don't speak Kannada. They don't understand India per se. So I consider myself very, very different from them in every respect.

Madhu: Where were they?

Flavia: They were in Aden⁵², which is a sea-port. My father was working there since 1950 and my siblings, the one after me, went when they were very small. In fact, the youngest was born there. So they were so westernised. So, when they came, they came on a tragedy point in my life. Just before my SSC⁵³ exam, my aunt died in her sleep. And my parents were scheduled to come, anyway. But when they landed in Bombay itself, my aunt died. And it became such a trauma for me. Because she is the only anchor in my life. I didn't know anybody. I didn't know anybody as a father, mother, siblings, nothing. But suddenly she was no more. She was not very old. She was about 56. And then my mother landed up and my siblings and I couldn't even talk to them. There was no language in which we could communicate. So I would — I remember this very clearly where I would rehearse a sentence for about five minutes and then I will speak to one of my sisters. And invariably the sentence would be wrong. (...) But then there was — one sister younger than me who took control of me. She took me under her wings. And then she will say, this is the way to light the gas. And then they were going to school. My mother was going to work. She said at least you have to make rice and keep. And I had never lit a *choola*⁵⁴ in my life, in Mangalore. In Mangalore, I mean we had two, three maids in the home. Somebody to cook, somebody to water the garden, somebody to do something else. And I was brought up like a little princess. So suddenly I went into this situation, where it was really difficult in every sense. (...) Over a period, three years. I became westernised. I started speaking English. I didn't get sacked from my job.

Madhu: Wear stiletto shoes...stiletto.

⁵⁰ Karnataka: a state in South India.

⁵¹ Kannada: a language spoken throughout South India, also the state language of Karnataka.

⁵² Aden: a port city in Yemen.

⁵³ SSC: Secondary School Certificate

⁵⁴ *choola*: clay oven

Flavia: Stilettos — lipstick, kibstick, lace dresses with strapless bra and what have you. Matching bags and matching shoes and the whole lot — so much so again my mother started getting scared. “My daughters don’t do this. This one’s destined to go astray. (...) My mother used to wear a sari. My mother never used to wear lipstick. She used to smoke. She used to drink. But she was not western looking in her... she was more western in her approach. (...) But not really deeply I think rather superficially. (...) I also don’t have good memories of my father at all. Right from childhood, till now, till he died. He died soon after I went. (...) After my father died, I became very protective towards my mother, for one thing. I wanted to love her. I wanted her to care for me. And since my other two sisters had their boy friends, I would be at home, more with her, helping in the cooking, helping with whatever. And I wanted to build a relationship. Also I told you that, one sister had taken me under her wing, and had taught me the ways of living in Aden. And I was working by then. Within two months, I got a job as a typist and so I was working. And then it was fun. And it was fun, that five sisters and mother will go out shopping together, we will buy stuff. We will cook if we want. If we don’t want, we will not cook. If we just want to eat fruits for the whole day, we will eat fruits. And all that started when my father was ill. When my mother had gone, we were just five sisters. And my elder sister was just two years older than me. She was 18, I was 16. So some people used to send us food. Otherwise, we used to go and buy watermelon and say, ‘Today we will have watermelon. Today we will have some fruit. Today we will go to somebody’s house to eat.’ So we had developed a pattern which is not traditional house-keeping. (...) Then my elder sister used to sew. She used to stitch all our clothes. My mother used to bake cakes and my sisters used to ice them. And we had lot of fun together as a family. Go for outings. Meet friends. My sister used to drive. So we felt much more liberated than many other families around. (...) So we became a sort of a very early kind of feminism. If you would like to term it that way. Very — no dependence on men. Trying to live your life. Even electrical connections to fix up. Whatever had to be done, in the house we used to do. Repairing the car, changing the tyre. So there was no segregation that this is men’s job, this is women’s job. (...)

Madhu: So that is the period you spent in Aden, and, you started working. You became a working woman. How did you come to Bombay?

Flavia: Well, the trouble, political trouble kept on increasing, families started migrating. You had a choice, whether to stay on in Aden and take citizenship or go to England or come back to India. A lot of families were coming. Sometime in May, 1967, my mother brought my younger sisters, two of them, to Mangalore. Kept them with my aunt. Another aunt and sent them to school, for school admission and then she came back. (...) So, when she came back, we thought there is no point in staying here. But we still needed the money. First year we spent in clearing up the debt and we didn’t have enough money to come back actually. (...) And we came back in October. And when we came in October, in November, my elder sister’s wedding was fixed in Bombay. So suddenly, I was, again put in a very contradictory situation where the elder sister is married and the younger sister is married and the middle sister, who is not married, has asthma. And my mother started getting very panicky, saying, “What will people say?” For the first time she started saying this. “What will people say?” So I said, my mother was very modern, very progressive. Not at all traditional while she was in Aden. But when she came back to Bombay suddenly she went back to what she had left behind in the fifties. (...) And she said, there are proposals. I was really shocked. “What do you mean proposals?” By then I had read all the

English novels, Mills and Boon and everything. I said, “What do you mean proposals?” “No, things don’t happen this way in India. This is not Aden. This is India, marriages are arranged. You have to have trust in God and you have to say yes. See how I got married and lived happily.” (...) So, we were not really a traditional family. We were not at all a traditional family. So when actually my husband came to see me he came with a relative of his, who also happens to be a relative of mine — Uncle of mine. And there was nobody at home. I was in my home clothes. After sometime, he sat and he said, “Where is the bride?” Nobody is there. I am only giving them water. It was sort of very funny kind of tradition imposed on a very modern non-traditional family. So that uncle said, “She only is the bride.” Then after an hour, my mother came and (s)he said, “He is okay. He is fine, he is selected.” (...) Whole night my mother worried me: Say yes, say yes. And I don’t know, out of disgust, I said ‘Yes’. Then we went back to Mangalore. Came back a week before my marriage and I got married. (...)

Madhu: Flavia, when you look back to the beginning of your relationship with the Women’s Movement, from a domesticated person to straight in the public life of being an activist, how do you look back at it? Can you tell us something about the beginning of it?

Flavia: Well, the beginning was very dramatic and very dynamic I think. And I look back as one of the best phases in my life. Do you want me to tell you exactly how it happened?

Madhu: Yeah, if you can remember that event and remember it with today’s context and understanding.

Flavia: Well, it happened as I said, very, very dramatically. At that time, I was just a housewife with three children. And basically because of the domestic problems I wanted to do something, but I didn’t know what it would be. I wanted to do something outside. And like a typical Christian woman, I was going to church every day and whatever happened in the church, I used to be part of that. I mean I used to attend, not be part of it, but just be around. So there was this particular week, where there was a... sort of we call it a mission. So everyday, there was one outside speaker speaking. And that particular day, the theme was Christ the Radical. And Jean, who was a student, came to speak. And I liked. And she talked about the anti-rape movement and she talked about the Mathura case⁵⁵ and how women are mobilising etc and I was really impressed. And I have never spoken to anybody who is a speaker or who addresses a congregation and I felt a very strong urge that I should ask her, “How does she do it? Where do they meet? What is the organisation? And is it possible to get in touch with them?” But throughout the whole mass and everything, I was thinking how will I go and how will I ask this question to her, “Will I have the guts?” Then after church, I waited and everybody was speaking to the speaker and all, and finally with lot of courage I said I have to ask this question. So I went and very hesitantly asked her — I said, “Can I ask you a question? What is it that you do? You

⁵⁵ Mathura rape case: The story of Mathura, a 16-year-old tribal girl who was raped by two policemen, became the impetus for reform in India’s rape laws. A sessions court acquitted the accused, stating that Mathura had eloped with her lover and that as she was “habituated to sexual intercourse,” the policemen could not have raped her. It further ruled that Mathura was a liar and that intercourse had occurred with her consent. But a high court convicted the accused, saying that mere surrender did not mean consent. However, the Supreme Court set aside the high court judgment and acquitted the policemen. The court ruled that Mathura had raised no alarm, there were no visible injuries on her body and hence her allegations of rape were untrue. The judgment outraged women’s groups and triggered a major campaign for changes in rape laws.

said ‘You must do all this’ but you never said what is it that one can do.’ So she said, “We have a group, I will introduce you to somebody who goes to these group meetings. You come to my office.” So we fixed up that the next day that I would go to her office which was near VT. It was an organisation called BUILD. So she was working for BUILD. So there she called another activist. Her name was Wilma. It was all very, very Christian at this point. So they said Wilma goes to the meeting, so Wilma will take you and Wilma is an activist. So I got immediately fixed up. I think Forum meetings were held on Fridays in those days. (...)

Madhu: The same Forum Against Oppression of Women⁵⁶?

Flavia: The same Forum Against Oppression of Women. It was called Forum Against Rape at that time. So I was so excited that I am going to go and meet a group. I was very nervous also, and very excited. Then I thought about Wilma and her two children and I said, “Oh poor thing, she is an activist who works so late, at least I should bake a cake and keep for her children.” Looking back, I find it so foolish today, but even Wilma remembers, even today, how when I met her, I brought her a cake for her daughters — she has two daughters. (...) I was very enthusiastic and I went for the meeting. I went and met her at the Dockyard Road station from where I was living, she waited for me there. Both of us took the train, we went to Mahim⁵⁷. I have never travelled by the Dockyard Harbour line train anyway, before that. So we got down at Mahim station and we walked to this place where the meetings were held at the time at Mahim near Sitladevi. It was a big room and lot of women were there and very smart and very articulate women, very young and they were discussing this case of rape. And then, everybody had to do introduction. So everybody said what they are, some are journalists, some are PhD students, some are grass root activists belonging to X organisation or Y organisation and I was again very nervous and hesitant, “What will I say, what will I say when my turn comes.” So somebody before me said, “I am a housewife!” Looking back again, I know that person is not a housewife at all. She was an activist and initiated so many groups before that. Jairas’s wife I mean, I shouldn’t address her like that — Rohini. So, she said, ‘I am a housewife.’ And I said, ‘That’s really good, when my turn comes, I will also say ‘I am a housewife.’ So when my turn came, I said, ‘Like her, I am also a housewife.’ Looking back, again, I feel it’s so foolish to compare myself with Rohini who has been an activist for such a long time. But what I found in this group was all the women were so beautiful, so attractive, so self-confident and I had this urge, ‘I want to be like these women.’ So they were discussing this case of rape and they said Turbe⁵⁸, Turbe is, like, near Vashi. You have to take a bus from Dadar⁵⁹ and it will take about an hour and a half etc. So they said we need people to go and talk to this girl who has been raped. So nobody was raising their hand, one person raised after long time, again, the chairperson asked, ‘Who will go? Who will go?’ Then, next to me was this person, Vibhuti. By then, Vibhuti had finished giving me very important telephone numbers. She said, “If you are coming to the meeting, you must, you know, know these people. So many telephone numbers. For the first time, I had telephone numbers whom I could ring up. We had a phone, which I had, didn’t have any numbers except a cousin of mine to call. So there were these numbers, she said, “See these are the important

⁵⁶ Forum Against Oppression of Women: started as the Forum Against Rape in 1979, this campaign group takes up women’s rights issues like dowry, wife-beating and sexual harassment.

⁵⁷ A suburb of Mumbai.

⁵⁸ Turbe: a far-flung suburb of Karnataka.

⁵⁹ Dadar: An area in Mumbai city.

people, you should have, these are the lawyers, Indira Jaising and two, three other lawyers. (...) But what happened at the meeting was, Vibhuti was sitting next to me, and she said, “You raise your hand. Say you are going.” So I told her, “But I don’t know anything about investigation, I don’t know about anything, but I do have free time because it was summer holidays and tuitions had closed, final exams were over. So I told her, “I have time but I can’t go with these people.” So she said, “Okay, I will also come, we will both raise our hands”. So I raised up my hand. And by then, meeting was chaired by Gayatri. Gayatri was only 25, so was Vibhuti, only 25 at that time. And Gayatri was shouting at everybody, “Oh you people, you only come here and talk, Nobody can raise your hand, nobody can go for an investigation, what’s the point in coming for the meeting?” And I was like, very impressed, how this 25 year old girl was so confidently shouting at women much older than her, that you know, ‘You are not doing anything.’ So Vibhuti and me raised our hands. So Vibhuti, and me and I don’t remember the third person. So we were to go after two days. And before that, she said, “This is Indira Jaising — earlier batch, a few lawyers had gone so you go and meet Indira Jaising and see what has happened so far.” So next morning I called Indira Jaising. I said, ‘I would like to come.’ She said, “This is my place, stock exchange. You come there, 8th floor.” And again I asked a very foolish question. I said, “Whose office?” She said, “Whose office is it? My office.” (Laughter) So I said, “Okay.” So I was like, quite impressed. I also remember going to her office on that first day and she was like nice, cordial and I said, “See, I went to this meeting and people said you have gone last time with a group of lawyers this time so we are going next, so can you tell me what exactly did you find out.” So she said, “Actually we couldn’t find out much. Because, we couldn’t communicate with the people. They were speaking a different language. And I think the girl had... the rape had happened but nothing much had happened, the police had not investigated, so if you go, you find out further details and she gave me a few points. By then, earlier, once my husband had filed, threatened to file Restitution of Conjugal Rights⁶⁰, when I had left home. So while I was sitting there I thought let me get some free legal advice. So I asked her, ‘What is this Restitution of Conjugal Rights?’ She said, “Why?” I said, “I just want to know what is its validity? If somebody files, what will happen? So just explain to me a little bit.” But I was so impressed with myself that I knew the words ‘Restitution of Conjugal Rights’ that I could discuss it with a woman lawyer. So I just talked to her a little bit and I came back. Next we went and I told Vibhuti, “See, these are the points that we have to investigate.” So we met at Dadar and going to Turbe is a long journey, one and half years — one and half hours. So what you do? You ask, “What do you do? Which organisation you belong?” etc. (...)

Madhu: Which year?

Flavia: 1980. So I joined, like, around end of March. So Forum was only two months old. Nobody knew anybody much unless they belonged to a group earlier. So they were CPM,⁶¹ CPI,⁶² ML⁶³, then journalists, various people, lawyers, doctors. So various people from various backgrounds. Some had political experience and some didn’t have political experience and that

⁶⁰ Restitution of Conjugal Rights: a provision of the Hindu Marriage Act stating that if, after solemnisation of marriage, one spouse abandons the other without a reasonable excuse, the aggrieved party has a legal right to file a petition in the matrimonial court for restitution of conjugal rights.

⁶¹ Communist Party of India (Marxist).

⁶² Communist Party of India.

⁶³ Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist).

was the exciting thing. So it was natural to ask, what do you do? Which organisation do you come from? So in the process, I started speaking why it is important to me to join a Forum talked about my background a little bit and invariably the question was that, “If the situation is so bad, why don’t you leave?” And I thought these women are very foolish for asking this question. They claim they are activists and they understand women’s problems but somehow they didn’t understand women’s problems by the very fact that they were asking this question. I said, “How can I leave? Where will I go? My children are studying in school and they need a place, I can’t keep them at home. I need a place to stay. I need some stability. My mother doesn’t have the resources. I mean, all that I have finished trying. (...) When we reached Turbe, what happened was, suddenly I realised that this girl speaks Kannada. And her whole community speaks Kannada. So contrary to what I thought other people would be able to speak, nobody was able to speak, nor other people were asking the right questions. So when we realised — when I went — when they talked to me, I got a lot more information. For instance, the girl’s father had come and beaten her up. The girl had tried to commit suicide. She was trying to run away from there. It was very humiliating for her to stay in that situation. She was a big-made sixteen year old girl. Her mother was a construction worker so she was at home, she had to be kept at home but at home, it was not safe for her anymore. The *goondas*⁶⁴ in the area were always threatening her. So she was under this tremendous pressure and she started crying. When I started speaking to her in Kannada, she started speaking and crying and said, “I don’t want to stay here. I am really scared. My father has beaten me. My mother thinks that they want to marry me off. These *goondas* are threatening and putting pressure on her mother to withdraw the case.” Even the father was very upset why the mother had lodged the case. Father was not around when the case was lodged. It was a police rape. There were three policemen and one *goonda* who had raped her. Police investigation had not moved far. So I was able to get a lot of information about the case. We came back. We came back, next day I went to Indira Jaising’s office because I had to type and give this report. And actually, long before my marriage, I had worked as a typist. So my typing skill was excellent. But I had not typed for 13 years. Not seen a typewriter. So somebody was typing with one finger here, one finger there. Two-three of us had gone. So then I said, “Can I type?” She said, ‘No, no, you know it is somebody’s typewriter.’ I said, “No, I can type, let me try.” And they were quite shocked. And first and foremost, I was shocked that I could, you know, not at that same speed, but at least speed much better than anybody else. So I sat, I typed the report and gave it in. They said, “Oh you can type.” So put all the points down. give the report and this report would be read out on Friday, next. From that time, I became the anchor person for Turbe investigation. Every week I would go and the person who comes with me would change. Because somebody had to communicate and there had to be a link. So every time I went with a new set of people, every time this question was asked ‘Why did you join the Forum?’ And every time I would give the same *bhashan*⁶⁵ why I joined the Forum, why it is necessary for me. So my story was quite fixed in my mind by now. My background, my marriage, my children, the problem of leaving. (...) And every time, we came back, we would have theoretical arguments. Whether she is a virgin, whether she was a virgin or not. And somebody said, we could do this test etc. and I said, ‘Supposing she is not, then what?’ Are we implying that she was not raped or if supposing she is pregnant. We can have this information with us to help her. But can we make this information, supposing she is pregnant, even before the rape, so what, was she not raped? So every time I would defend it from her position because I used to speak to her. Not only speak to

⁶⁴ *Goondas*: local strongmen, toughs.

⁶⁵ *Bhasan*: speech.

her but somewhere connect, you know, the oppression of my individual life to what is happening to this girl. Then it came, that we would have a public demonstration. First demonstration of my life in the, giving speech, story starts there actually. So we had a demonstration and quite a successful demonstration.

Madhu: At Turbe?

Flavia: At Turbe. (...) Now, mind you, this was a time when Women's Movement itself was new. This culture of demonstration was new for Women's Movement. So when we said demonstration, there was a lot of excitement. How should we do it? You know the campaigns, posters, who will speak etc. So it came to be that since I was the person going, I was the anchor person over there, I could communicate to the women and also speak in English etc. So it was decided that in order to reach out the group on whose behalf we were making the statement, that I should do the public speech. So I was, I was not scared. I thought it was natural. But I was scared of speaking in Kannada, whether I could pull it off. But facts-wise I knew everything. (...) So we were meeting at Dadar. Now these Forum meetings used to be held at a place called ISRE — Institution for Social Research and Education. And one of the trustees, her name is Meera Savara who had sent off the first letters for the Forum, to constitute the Forum Against Rape, following the Mathura judgment. But when I joined in that one month, Meera Savara was not here. She had gone to the US for some meeting. So Meera Savara was there, she had just come back for the demonstration, in time for the demonstration. So she came, trousers and shirt and hat and etc. and somebody said this is Flavia. So she said, 'Oh! This is Flavia. This is the new phenomenon that has happened to the Forum in my absence for one month. I really wanted to meet you ya, who is this character who has just taken over?' I said, "Not taken over but just for this Turbe thing." (...) So I gave this speech and there were lot of men. All the male spouses and partners of all the feminists had come for the demonstration because it was happening in Turbe, there might be police trouble, etc but the enthusiasm and the excitement of a Women's Movement happening was very exciting to the male partners as well. So lot of men today I meet will say, 'Oh, I was there when you gave that speech (...) That speech has become, has really sort of stayed on I think with the Women's Movement and whoever was there. What happened was that at the end of it, people were arrested, various sections were hoisted on to the activists because we tried to enter the police station, we tried to, sort of — you know, not *gherao*⁶⁶ actually but somewhat close to that. There were journalists, it came in the newspaper, and it was a big thing. Next day, people were scared that you know there will be police complaint, FIRs⁶⁷ would be filed against them for unlawful entry into a public space etc. But the point had been made for Turbe. Now going on from there, from that public meeting, I really don't know what happened. Yeah, case got eventually withdrawn but FIR got filed. But it was getting very dangerous for the girl to stay there. So we got the girl out from there into Sneha Sadan⁶⁸ at Andheri⁶⁹. A lot of things happened with this case. Finally the father of the girl came to us and said I want to take her out because we want to withdraw the case, she is getting marriage proposals and you must give money for the dowry because of you, the case has become public.

⁶⁶ *Gherao*: protest.

⁶⁷ FIR: First Information Report (official complaint filed with police).

⁶⁸ Sneha Sadan: an orphanage.

⁶⁹ Andheri: a district in the city of Mumbai (Bombay).

So this is all over in one year. But somehow, this girl, her name was Kaushia Bi, a Muslim girl, she became our conscience. (...)

Madhu: How do you think this Turbe incident has influenced your life and work so to say?

Flavia: It was a great learning process for me personally and for the Forum collectively. I think every time we discussed that case, our own attitudes, values, positions, etc, were being expressed. And for me, it became my conscience. What are we doing to this girl? I mean, are we right in doing this? Displacing her, bringing her to our situation, etc. But what else happened was, after the demonstration, we felt we had made the community more vulnerable. The threats on the community increased. So there was a suggestion to start something called Mahila Atma Suraksha Sangh⁷⁰. Because when we went there for investigation, we also found that there were more rapes than Kaushia-bi's. Rape was a common occurrence. Now I personally found the idea quite absurd. And I, that is the time I wrote this piece, 'Why I joined the Forum.' I said there is no Mahila Atma Suraksha Sangh in Bombay. There is nothing here in Bombay, which will prevent a woman from committing suicide. There is nothing against domestic violence that we experience in our midst. And we want to do something far out as if there are no problems in Bombay. And we will never be able to sustain it, people don't speak the language, it costs so much to go and come. In fact, every time I went I spent more than 50 rupees. Just on bus fare. So I said, how am I going to sustain this? Why start something there? Let us start something here. And it is in this context, to make that point that I first wrote my autobiography. So that thing was very powerful and so by then I didn't write it in my own name. (...) I was scared. I was still staying with the husband. So I used a pseudonym to write it. (...) But after I wrote this, as I mentioned, Meera Savara, she was very taken up by this. In fact, she helped, me with like editing, language etc. (...) But she offered me this project of studying wife beating in Bombay — domestic violence. And that became a turning point for me because I was earning, it gave me a source of livelihood away from my home. It was part-time. She was ready to make all kinds of adjustments to me. Basically it was — based, like interviews of 100 women — 50 from middle-class, and 50 from the working class and I did the study from, say, June to November. November was again a turning point, a major turning point, I should say. From June to November, we were also preparing for a national conference on rape. The first women's national conference of activists from various places. And again I want to emphasise, this was the beginning of the Women's Movement. Women's issues were not really discussed. Women's groups had just mushroomed post — Mathura in different cities. So Hyderabad — Stree Shakti Sanghatana or Bangalore — Vimochana and the group in Delhi — I forget the name — Radha and various other people. So all of us together decided. Vibhuti was the initiator; we said we will have a women's conference in November. Now for that conference, my paper would be presented. And for that to type that paper, I had borrowed Meera's typewriter. (...) This is the period from June to November where my domestic situation also became very volatile. An earlier period, I had no control over what happened to me. Why this happened to me? Here, some way, I was actively invoking the violence by doing whatever I wanted. (...)

So the 50 women came from a situation of some way related to women in the movement and it was then, I stopped being the isolated case of domestic violence and that was very important to me. So in the conference, I was presenting this study and that's the time my husband said, 'You

⁷⁰ Mahila Atma Suraksha Sangh: Society for the Protection of Women.

will not go for the conference and I said, “I will.” So he says, “But I will take the daughters and I will send my son to my sister’s house, so you have no responsibility.” So I mean he didn’t give his consent but that didn’t matter. So I went for the conference. The conference was really exhilarating because we were like about 200 to 300 women who still continue to be very strong feminists, even today. And we were much younger between the ages 20 to 30. Chandralekha⁷¹ was there, I mean you name it and the people were there. Everybody came at their own expense. Everybody had to pay for their own food. It was not a seminar, as we understand seminars today. Totally different situation. And tribal rape to army rape to various kinds of issues of rape, health issues, violence, domestic violence etc. I presented my paper. My study was almost complete but there was very less time, so I couldn’t really present it but Vibhuti did such a wonderful translation that in translation she said much more than I could actually present. And everybody was quite impressed, and changing the focus from dowry to domestic violence. (...) Vibhuti’s husband Amar was working on a community project and they wanted somebody else to come into that project, a social worker. So I got to do the interview. Without any experience of social work or any kind of study, I went for the interview and they were doing this community health work. (...) I met Dr. Athiya, very important figure in community health, even today. And he interviewed me and he said, ‘What makes you come for this interview?’ You don’t have the qualifications.” So, I said, “But I understand women. I have done this study and I am aware of what women go through. So I would be able to, so if it is communicating to women, I would be able to do this.” Then he explained to me his programme and he said, “We work with the youth.” So I told him. “Then your focus is all wrong. If you want to go to women and children and discuss their health issues, you can’t start with the youth of the community.” He said, “But the youth of the community are the main people there who will be able to bring in change.” And I said, “No.” I disagreed with him at the meeting. I said, “You must start working with the women and then only you will come to know about the health of the family, whether it is the woman, whether it is the children, whether it is the husband. So he was very impressed that hardly anybody challenges Dr. Athiya. Me, out of my ignorance, like I didn’t know who he was and I had the audacity to say, “No, your program is all wrong and you have to start all over again.” And just because I said that, I got the job. And I was to start after the conference. (...) Now at conference, what happened was, it was a changing point for many of us, our own understanding of sexuality, sexual relationships, our bodies, our control over our bodies, all these issues had been discussed. Marital rape etc, issues that, we had now taken for granted. There was this Chandralekha poster which was very controversial in the seminar itself where this woman, Kali, with ten heads stamping over the head of the man etc. I was very, taken up, taken over by the poster, I had got copies and I put that poster outside my bedroom. So next day, or rather that night, my husband approached me sexually and I declined I said, “I am too tired and you know stay away.” Next day I was leaving for work and that anger had accumulated in him that I had gone to the conference without his consent. I had come back. I was not being grateful. I was being really arrogant, which I was. And I am not blaming him for being arrogant because all of us came back with a renewed vigour, so to say, after this conference. So when he said “I will not let you go.” I said, “No” I will go because I have to be there at a particular time.” It was a slum in Chembur⁷². He said, “I will not let you go, I will, whatever lock you,” etc. When he came to

⁷¹ Chandralekha: a legendary Indian dancer known for reinterpreting classical traditions in Indian dance and for her activism in the women’s movement in India.

⁷² Chembur: A district of Mumbai (Bombay).

beat me, I closed my door and there was this picture of Kali⁷³ with the ten heads stamping on the head of the man on the door. I closed the door and that was the picture you would be confronted with. I don't think, anybody's life, everybody's life must have changed but nobody's life changed as radically. You must understand I was very new for theory. I mean, like, for me theory was practice. Like, anything I heard, I would really incorporate it within my life. I couldn't understand how other people's lives were not changing. People would all grumble about their partners and spouses and all, but it was not making an impact as much as it was making on me. I was like a clean state or a virgin land where everything could be soaked up. So — I — it was a very violent scene. He even threw that typewriter that I had borrowed from Meera Savara at me. It fell down. It broke. I walked out. He said, "Take your children and go. Take your daughters. I said, "No I will not take my daughters. The daughters are yours, they will stay. I will work." He said, "Either you stay in the house and not work or you walk out and work." "The choice is to go out and work, I will not stay here." Then, he said, "You have to walk out with your children." And I said, "I cannot take the children, they are going to school," whatever, "You are the father, you look after them." And then he literally pushed the children, it was a very violent scene and the children got hurt on the door screaming and whatever, (...) I walked out with the children. There was a group of women who had said, "Okay, this is the situation you are in. It's really not fair that because of lack of resources that you stay in this situation. So, you take your time and if you take a decision, then, we are there for you." So I went to one of them, I kept the children there because I had to go to Turbe. There was no phone, no mobile, no nothing. And Vibhuti's husband Amar was waiting for me there.

Madhu: Not in Turbe (...)

Flavia: Not in Turbe, in Chembur, Lal Dangar. So I went to Lal Dangar and he said, "You are late." First day of my work and I am late. So I told Amar, "The situation has changed, something very drastic has happened and I have to make arrangements" etc. And the women in the community were so good, they said, "You stay here, we will build a hut for you, we will arrange water for you. You stay amongst us, we will look after your children. You don't worry about the house." It was so overwhelming for me that they had accepted me totally. This acceptance helped me to work there much better. I mean, okay they have problem, I have problem and within those problems we work. So, somewhat, that concept, you know the divide that we go there to work for them was broken on the first day itself.

Madhu: This period is the beginning of you reacting against the feminist agenda of working on middle class morality? What happens to others, what happens to others? — What needs to be addressed? Some laws need to be passed, the beginning of your crusade against such morality?

Flavia: Yeah. The beginning was much earlier. The beginning was — when I was going to Turbe. When I was going to Turbe, I want to tell you that every time I went, I spent my own money. Nobody asked me. Every time people said, Flavia will go. Nobody asked me how I was going. (...) Then it came that and before the meeting, they would say 'You knows, some of us think and some of us act.' And I challenged it, 'What do you mean? You mean when we go to Turbe and we act there, we don't think? So you all sit in your office. We can't go there so we

⁷³ Kali: Powerful Hindu goddess depicted as slayer of men.

will do the thinking and you do the acting and that is the reason I wrote, ‘Why I joined the Forum’ as well. (...) So in the meeting what happened was, my, ‘Why I joined the Forum’ that autobiographical piece was cyclostyled, and sold at the meeting for one rupee or two rupees. And my daughters were given the task of selling it, and my name was not there. So my daughters would go and say, ‘Will you please buy this? This is my Mummy’s story.’ (...)

Madhu: So when you left home, when you joined Forum, when your new life started, you were not educated. And I wanted to know why you thought of educating yourself further? To be an activist at that point, it was believed, you don’t need an institutional academic background. So, why you thought so?

Flavia: Well let me first tell you what happened when I left home. When I left home, there was a lot of euphoria, there was a lot of excitement. But to live the life on a day-to-day level was really very difficult. Suddenly I became very poor. I was not used to being so poor. No money. No money for basics, no shelter, you’re totally displaced. The children are poor and they are not used to being so poor. And they in fact started getting vitamin deficiency, you know the things that lack of food gives one. And they were placed in a hostel but it was in effect an orphanage. And that’s the place where domestic maids get trained. So one of my daughters gave up studies, she said, everybody else becomes a domestic maid, mummy. What’s the problem? Why to study? Also my daughter failed an exam. That was around the time of the first women’s conference in Bombay. That day I got the report in hand and she had failed. Somehow I felt that I was struggling so much because I was not educated. Had I been educated, I would have been able to get a job better. Also, in the Women’s Movement I felt I was reduced to the level of activist because I had not studied. Because all the people who were telling me education is not important were all doing their PhDs. So there was one friend with whom I had stayed for a short time who told me that, “You know Flavia, everybody tells you education is not important. It’s okay if your daughter has failed. Don’t take it seriously or okay if you have not studied.” She said, “Don’t trust them. Because they all come from a particular social class. They are all doing their PhDs and you will be at the level of SSC.” So, she, in fact, drove me to give my first entrance exam in SNDT⁷⁴ and also during my first-year BA, I was in fact staying with her. So she would take a lot of trouble, get the books, read them, summarise them for me and she said, “You have to do this exam, there is no looking back. You have to have graduation. Forever, you cannot just be a matriculate because you will really regret. And this age that you have left at the age of 33 is not so late to study.” (...) And as soon as I got my graduation, I enrolled for law. So it wouldn’t make any sense to me to just be a graduate. So my purpose was very clear that because of my own case which got messed up, even with the best of the feminist lawyers as well as other lawyers and I knew where things were going wrong. Somewhere within the movement, we’d evolved strategies at the pre-litigation stage. But the litigation was still going very conventionally as established forms. And we were not doing any innovative interventions. So for me, being a lawyer was a decision connected with my study. But practising law was another decision. Two different decisions. I wanted to be a lawyer in order to intervene in the legal strategies for women, with a lawyer. (...)

⁷⁴ SNDT: A Women’s University in Mumbai, established in 1916 by social reformer Maharshi Karve, who believed that education was the only instrument for enabling women to be economically independent and self confident.

Madhu: When did you think of starting Women's Centre? What was the motivation? And how it was different from Forum?

Flavia: Forum Against Oppression of Women was a campaign group. We would take up an issue, take up a demonstration, the issue would be in this newspapers etc. But the composition of the Forum would change constantly. That means there is no membership, no structure — anybody could come, anybody could not come. We were into the mode of structurelessness of the Women's Movement of that time. So we were against any kind of structure, creation of any structure, official positions etc. But because of the visibility that the Forum had, a number of women started approaching the Forum for help. And Forum was not in a position to respond. It's not that Forum was not responding but it would be an individual response. Somebody would take up the case, somebody would go, somebody would follow up — but Forum itself didn't have a place for meetings. Sometimes, we would meet in open garden, sometimes we would meet in somebody's office at the University, somebody's house. So all the time, the places kept shifting. So it was very difficult for women who wanted to find the group that would give them help, to actually locate the group. Because the group didn't exist, there was no office, there's nothing. And that continues till today. I think that is both the strength of the Forum and its weakness. That is — it is a moving, fluctuating, structureless group.

Madhu: Actually a Forum

Flavia: Actually a Forum. So, I felt that if you are going to respond, if you are posing, if you are claiming to respond to the women's needs then there should be fixed timings, there should be an office, there should be somebody responsible, some kind of accountability to the women who approach you — and all this needed structure, so what I had conceived of the Women's Centre was having a formal place, a formal institution which would respond to the women in a very formal sense rather than the structurelessness of the Forum. But for me it was not a contradiction. It was both complementary and I think both were necessary. So, when at the initial group it started the centre, it was very clear that we will not do demonstrations. We will not have public protests but we would concentrate on counselling to individual women, helping them to solve their cases, supporting them. It was not, the word was not 'counselling'. The whole approach was we will share our experience and learn from each other. (...) Actually before the centre started itself we used to have a series of meetings questioning ourselves, our positions, our relationships, our sexuality — so there was a whole period before the centre actually started and we came together as a cohesive group. At least that's what we thought then. When the Centre started, there was this fear, that we heard, whether women would actually come and if they did come, what we would be able to offer them? But slowly women started coming in, mainly women of our same strata. Because articles were written about the whole concept of Centre etc. in different magazines and newspapers, etc, so women started approaching us. At that time, we didn't have our own place so we were functioning from a room in a friend's house, Sonal, and that place was also part of the Centre. So, slowly women started coming and one woman was struggling with her case and she had a lawyer whom we would refer other women also to the same lawyer, because he had really managed to fight this case for a long period of time and did manage to get this woman some rights regarding custody, etc. But unfortunately, in this particular case the relationship between the mother and daughter went very sour. The daughter was in her teens. Finally, she left the mother and went back to the father. Father had remarried

and his second wife had twins. And the mother was a nurse and she was pretty comfortable, she had made a house for herself and there was, all the basic necessities were there. Despite that, the daughter left the mother and went back to the father. (...) Now these were like very non-legal kind of interventions. There was another woman who came, who was like slightly from the lower strata with a baby of three months old. It was a love marriage, she was a Maharashtrian⁷⁵ — married a Bengali⁷⁶ -- and she brought this very cute-looking baby and she said, I want to put this baby in an orphanage. And we all started discussing and we said okay, orphanage is here, there — and the baby was sleeping. And when the child opened her eyes, such bright eyes and gave us all such sweet smile and the woman left and said we will come back and we will see what we can do. And after that, we all felt really terrible, that you know can we have any other option for this woman? Till the child was sleeping and all, it was an object, And we said, “Ya, ya, give on adoption that’s the best choice and you can move on with your life.” But when she came back, even she had changed the decision and said, “Is there some way that I can live with my daughter” And then finally at that time, Centre had collected some money and we were going to buy our own place. We had a public screening of a film and collected some money and we thought we would need a person in the office constantly, so can we give her a job? And in the initial stages, she used to bring the baby to the office and we said A Women’s Centre should be such a place you know where we should understand the problems of women and that you know child-caring, single motherhood, all these kind of problems. So till she could find a crèche for the child, she used to bring the child to the office and all of us used to be part of the process of looking after her child. So in a way, it was unrealistic, but in a way it was very innovative kind of, I will say....

Madhu: Participatory

Flavia: No. It was an illusion, it was a dream, utopia, enchantment that okay you know, we are all struggling women and we can do this kind of support. (...) A lot of things happened here and it was voluntary and it was — We did have a small grant but it was miniscule. So, I was working as a full-timer — for five years, I was the full timer. Initially we didn’t register. Again, we went through the debate, whether we should have a formal registration. Then we decided, we will have a formal registration, but only in name. There will be a secretary, there will be a treasurer, there will be a registration. But we will function more as a non-registered organisation. The membership is only formal but functioning will be informal. In fact, the structure and functioning has been a major part of the debate for women’s groups all over India who started at that point of time. (...) But gradually, a more formal structure began to evolve. Where there was a line drawn between those who were doing the counselling and those counselled. Somewhere, class differences -- class, caste, community differences -- started coming in the process of counselling. Very gradually. (...) So differences started cropping out, ideological differences, the way we reach out to the women. I had so much power because I was the initiator. And maybe other people couldn’t deal with this kind of power. So at some point — And at that time I was still doing law and for me, my law degree made sense only if I was part of this, structure, where I could intervene on behalf of women.

⁷⁵ Maharashtrian: belonging to the state of Maharashtra.

⁷⁶ A person from the Indian state of Bengal; Bengali is their language.

Madhu: But Flavia this is problem of any service-oriented centres, no? How do you look at it now? (...)

Flavia: When you talk about feminist structurelessness that there is no structure, no authority, all of us are equal, we will not have hierarchy we will have more lateral kind of functioning this was a dream within the Women's Movement at that time. And though it was a service-giving organisation, it didn't really – we didn't think it would function in a traditional sense. We wanted to break that traditional mode. But unfortunately because we didn't conceptualise, we didn't theorise, we didn't actualise, we didn't give this new form a kind of a structure, it fell into the old mode, invariably. It fell over a period of time, not immediately. We started in '81 but by '85, '86, it was obvious that it was falling into this mode. We realised the problems that were happening. The concept of handling authority, concept of handling finance, the accountability to the women who come; none of it was specified and according to me, it didn't work. So when it didn't work, I think the trauma for me personally was more than the trauma of leaving home. There, I was leaving a traditional structure which all of us know that it is oppressive. That marriage can be oppressive, domestic violence would be there, then you move out. That is something acceptable and I could talk about it, I could theorise. But when you have a dream that you create something else, giving everything that you have, that this is going to work, this is alternate family. Even for my children, this was a family that we were trying to create, my children, other women's children, etc. A kind of an alternate structure, where you celebrate, where you have fun, when you are lonely you have someone you can reach out to, away from the Forum campaign, somewhere much more intimate, something very deep and when that collapsed, I think, somewhere, something died in me. The despair when I walked out of the Centre was really very, very, very traumatic because if that breaks, then there is nothing else. (...)

Madhu: So later on, much of your work was based on minority identity and gender and identity and relationship between gender and identity. At which point do you think this consciousness came in you?

Flavia: Well this has been with me for the whole decade, from '80 to '90. The slogan for the '80 to '90 was '*Hum sab ek hain*' we are all together, we are all women. But in the course of my work, I had mentioned earlier as well that all of us are not equal. We are equal within our unequal structures. So the fact that I was a minority was very conscious within me. It came up in many ways like till I became a feminist, I was a believer. I was very Christian because that was the only life I knew, that was the only exposure that I had. So when I became a feminist, it was essential that I give up that to embrace feminism. I became secular — I gave up religion, I gave up culture, I gave up belief, I gave up dress code. And I imbibed the mainstream — everything. Food habits to dress code to festivals, to everything. But somewhere, there was a discontent in me that the way I am made to give up or forced to give up or find the necessity to give up the other people don't have to give up, because theirs is the norm. You can have a Ganpati⁷⁷ in your office because it is a cultural symbol. You can organise national-level meetings on Christmas day or immediate next day after Christmas but you will not have anything during Diwali⁷⁸ because Diwali is festival time. (...)

⁷⁷ Ganpati: Hindu elephant god.

⁷⁸ Diwali: Hindu festival of lights.

Madhu: Do you think that other minority women were also thinking in the similar way?

Flavia: Ya, I remember during the 1985 conference, many women had protested -- Fatima Bernard, Ruth Manorama, Gabrielle Dietrich -- all feminists from the South had asked this questions, “Why is the meeting being organised around Christmas time because this is the time we spend with our family.” But it didn’t seem to matter and everybody went on and held this meeting. And small, small issues like food habits. (...) We always ask — what would you like to eat? Do you eat this? Do you not eat this? In fact it was my children who raised this issue. They said, “Mummy, nobody ever asks us when we go to their house. They make this *rasam*⁷⁹ and *sambar*⁸⁰. Nobody asks us whether we like to eat or not. We hate it. We can’t eat it. Why can’t they make some fish or meat, what we like to eat?” And that question had not even come into my mind or in another way, like say when I was working in the slum and people would always get you tea, coffee or cold drink. So when I say, “No, I will just have water” people used to be overwhelmed because the caste norms don’t permit you to drink water in their homes. And suddenly when you say this, the bond is created because you drink water. So how food was playing a role in this segregation, how dress was playing a role. Festivals were playing a role. So there was a discontent individually felt by some of us. And somehow it got articulated in the Jadhavpur⁸¹ conference. The other incident that I can share that, there was a cross in my home, which earlier in my house, there were no religious symbols. And after my brother died a very sudden and a very painful death, one of my sisters gave me this cross as a remembrance of that. And my friends would come and stay, see the cross and say, “Flavia, are you a believer?” I would say not a believer, you know, I just have a cross. “Why do you have a cross in your house?” But it never struck me to ask anybody “Why do you have a Ganesh⁸² in your house? Why do you have a Krishna⁸³ in your house?” Because if I ask that question, I would look like a fool because, ‘Oh this is culture, you know, this is an artwork’ whereas here, it would be religion. (...) But why I raised this issue was that this whole IAWS⁸⁴ conference was on religion, culture, ethnicity — gender, religion, culture, and ethnicity. There were about nine workshops there. And every single workshop was led by an upper-caste, mainstream Hindu woman. But there was a plenary session in which two of us were invited — Raziya Patel who is an activist and myself as plenary speakers. And the third one who would speak about Hindu culture or about Sati⁸⁵ incidents was an academician. So there were three of us. Before the conference, I went to Delhi because Vinadi⁸⁶ was chairing the conference and she said I would like to meet you before the conference. So I went and asked her, what would you like me to speak. She said, “Flavia, we have chosen you because I want you to speak from your heart.” So I said, ‘If I speak from my heart, you may not like it’ So she said, “No, it doesn’t matter.” (...) As I mentioned to you, Women’s Centre, structurelessness, domestic violence, support groups — I had been working on all these issues — ’80 to ’90 from ’90 there was a consciousness about identity, culture, religion etc. So according to me I could have been invited to head a session, put together

⁷⁹ *Rasam*: spicy tomato broth.

⁸⁰ *Sambar*: South Indian vegetable curry.

⁸¹ Jadhavpur: a university in Calcutta.

⁸² Ganesh: Hindu elephant god (also known as Ganpati).

⁸³ Krishna: One of the most important Hindu deities.

⁸⁴ IAWS: Indian Association of Women’s Studies.

⁸⁵ Sati: a traditional Hindu practice in which a widow is burnt to death on her dead husband’s funeral pyre. Also means “virtuous woman.”

⁸⁶ Vina Mazumdar, also interviewed by the Global Feminisms Project.

a session how minority women feel about these issues within the Women's Movement. Instead I was invited as a panel speaker there for others to see. (...) As a Christian minority woman, you speak at this panel. And there was Razia Patel who was a Muslim activist. And according to me, then, the movement had made a segregation. According to me, the movement had had in a way slotted me as against the norm. The norm was mainstream Hindu academician. And I was the other — the minority the Christian, activist woman. (...) I was, like, really upset and so I (?) Vinadi⁸⁷ told me you speak from your heart. So I spoke from my heart. But more important, I raised the issue that in this whole UCC⁸⁸ debate, how Hindu Law operates on Hindu women has not been questioned. The Hindu monogamy, bigamy, or polygamy is not an issue. It's only the Muslim that becomes a context. In that, are we being communal. Are we endorsing a right-wing political ideology? And more than that, what I did speak about, is within the Women's Movement, how the segregation actually takes place. (...) And I was speaking in the context of Shah Bano⁸⁹ and Muslim Women's Act, which took Muslim Women out of Section 125, which is a secular provision, and into a special act! But I said in 1976, Hindu women marrying under Special Marriage Act⁹⁰ have been taken out from the Hindu Law, from the secular provision and are placed in the Hindu Succession Act for the sake of succession, so that co-parsenary or Hindu male rights could be preserved. And I said, that is the time where there was the report, Towards Equality — in which Vinadi and others were part of. And based on their recommendations, this, 1976, this law became enacted. (...) But I was not supposed to speak in this manner. In fact, what Razia said didn't make history because Razia toed the line that is prescribed, saying, "My community is communal, my community is oppressive to women. I need your help, you secular people, please help me in my struggle against my religious leadership." That doesn't challenge anything in anyone. What I said, sort of a latent communalism in mainstream feminists, was not what I was supposed to speak. I was supposed to speak — the Catholic Church is oppressive, which it is. How I am denied the right of divorce because of own laws, which I had been. But I spoke beyond that, and that was not what was expected. I was not expected to challenge the feminist movement. The environment was not ready for that. Babri Masjid⁹¹ had not happened at

⁸⁷ Vina Mazumdar, also interviewed by the Global Feminisms Project.

⁸⁸ UCC: Uniform Civil Code

⁸⁹ Shah Bano: Shah Bano, a 62 year old Muslim woman and mother of five, was divorced by her husband in 1978. The Muslim personal law (marriage, gifts, inheritance, adoption and a few other civil laws are under the purview of personal laws in India - they are different for Christianity, Islam and Hinduism) allows the husband to do this without his wife's consent. Shah Bano, because she had no means to support herself and her children, approached the courts to secure maintenance from her husband. The Supreme Court invoked Article 125, which applies to everyone regardless of caste, creed, or religion. It ruled that Shah Bano be given maintenance money, similar to alimony. The orthodox Muslims in India felt threatened by what they perceived as an encroachment of the Muslim Personal Law, and protested loudly at the judgement. In response, the Congress party, which had an absolute majority in Parliament at the time, passed an act that nullified the Supreme Court's judgment in the Shah Bano case and upheld the Muslim Personal Law.

⁹⁰ Special Marriage Act: Enacted in 1954 to provide a special form of marriage by any person in India and all Indian nationals in foreign countries irrespective of the religion either party to the marriage may profess.

⁹¹ Babri Masjid: A mosque in Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh. The mosque is believed to have been built on the foundations of a Hindu temple, razed by Muslim invaders. The temple was believed to have been the birth-place of Lord Rama (a mythological figure revered as a God by Hindus.) Who owns this spot? The Hindu majority or the Muslim minority? This controversial question has dominated Indian politics over the years. In 1992, rampaging Hindu activists egged on by the Bharatiya Janata Party (India's Hindu nationalist party) attacked the Babri mosque, with stones, sticks and even bare hands. There was unprecedented rioting across the country.

that time. And I was accused of breaking the movement, segregating the movement. The whole concept of ‘We are all one together’ was challenged when I said, You feminists, you Hindu mainstream feminist — I am speaking from a minority position, the position which I was invited to and I am addressing a congregation, a gathering of mainstream Hindu academicians. (...)

Madhu: Actually, Uniform Civil Code is a term, which has almost become a synonym. What all does it stand for?

Flavia: Uniform Civil Code, actually in different times meant different things. During the Constitutional Assembly debates in pre-Independence period, it meant majority-minority identity politics and that is why it was placed in Directive Principles⁹² because they said ‘Time is not ripe for enforcing Uniform Civil Code’ because it became an issue of Muslim identity. And after the Partition, it became a very difficult question. Then, even, prior to that, if you see, in 1930s it surfaced as a women’s question by AIWC⁹³ who wanted to look at different personal laws and see what were the inequalities within that. In ’80s again, we see after the Shah Bano, there was a very strong demand by the Women’s Movement for a Uniform Civil Code. Now what, what this Uniform Civil Code actually meant was that laws should be equitable, they should give justice to women and different personal laws have different kinds of inequalities built into that. So, if there is one law, it will be just. By the time, the ’90s surfaced, a lot of women including myself started questioning this premise that -- on what basis are you saying that Uniform Civil Code will give justice to women? Because in different personal laws, different kinds of injustices are there, and whether they can be dealt with, within those personal laws rather than asking for a demand of the Uniform Civil Code. Now, the issue became very problematic for the Women’s Movement in the late ’80s because post-Shah Bano, it became an issue of right-wing... a political demand for the right-wing parties. (...) And the slogan was, ‘*Hum do hamare do unke char aur pachees bacche*⁹⁴’, you know something to that, that they’re four but their children will be twenty-five. So, there was a fervour, created that if Muslims are allowed polygamy, then Muslims will be a majority over a time — very illogical. But there’s (it’s a) a third element here, which, according to me is the most dangerous. (...) That’s the liberal, moderate people in society who have this western concept, western values that monogamy is the norm and monogamy should be the norm and uncivilized people have polygamy. So, in order to be modern, in order to be civilized, there should be a Uniform Civil Code. (...) So, according to me, there are three segments in the UCC (Uniform Civil Code) debate. The Women’s Movement for gender justice laws, the communal, communal element, the right-wing parties which has got anti-Muslim agenda, and the liberals who want a norm of monogamy because it is a Western ideal of an ideal

Today, the BJP is the ruling party and its goals include building a temple and erasing the remains of the mosque. The demolition of the mosque on December 6, 1992 and the ensuing violence has still not been addressed by the Indian courts.

⁹² A feature of the Indian Constitution. Although the Directive Principles are asserted to be "fundamental in the governance of the country," they are not legally enforceable. Instead, they are guidelines for creating a social order characterized by social, economic, and political justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity as enunciated in the constitution's preamble. In some cases, the Directive Principles articulate goals that, however admirable, remain extremely vague.

⁹³ AIWC: All India Women’s Conference.

⁹⁴ *Hum do hamare do unke char aur pachees bacche*: A bigoted slogan that was targeted at large Muslim families. Literally translated, it means, “We two, ours two, they are four, and have twenty-five” The numbers refer to the number of children. The first part of the slogan, “We two-Our’s two” was promoted by the government to popularise family planning. However, the anti-Muslim suffix was added later.

family. And over a period, we began to question these premises. (...) The Movement split. After the Babri Masjid demolition where some of us changed our views and we said that we cannot have this UCC (Uniform Civil Code) demand, whether it is optional or compulsory. We need to look at it afresh, and we need to look at gender justice within different perspective. So, for me today gender justice doesn't lie in the Uniform Civil Code. Because we have such diverse communities, we have such diverse practices. (...) So, Hindu law means according to me, a Brahminical law⁹⁵ and a lot of communities do not fit those Brahminical codes of say, Saptapadi⁹⁶. So, when I went to take the legal literacy class among the lower-caste women in Rajkot⁹⁷ and I was talking about validity of marriage and you see, there is a marriage ceremony.' So, the person who is an urban facilitator, co-ordinator — so, she translated it into Gujarati saying you know, how we have Saptapadi; So the women started asking, what is Saptapadi? They said, "going round the fire"; they said, "what fire?" you know, "we take seven steps"; they said what? I mean... please explain.... She said... 'During marriage? How do you have a marriage ceremony? There's a fire, and the couple take seven steps. The women started laughing. She said, they said 'We are Dalits⁹⁸, we are not allowed to have fire as a witness. Only Brahmins can have fire. The most highest class, caste amongst us can only take four steps, not seven steps. And we have different ceremonies — For, if the bride is a virgin if the bride is not a virgin. If the bride is virgin, we have during daytime, sun as a witness; and if the bride is not a virgin, we have what they call a 'suryachupi' — hiding from the sun. We have it at night. And they got up and performed whatever are their wedding ceremonies just in Rajkot. And these people have never known what is Saptapadi. So, in a community like this, when the community decides when you get married, when you get divorced or who will have the children, etc. and they will never come in touch with courts at all, so what has the Hindu Code Bill been given to these people because they had everything before -- a customary norm or law of marriage, divorce and settlements. (...)

Now in this context, let us go back to Shah Bano. Shan Bano seems to be the worst thing that ever happened, the Muslim woman seem to be the worst thing that ever happened to the whole country. Now what is Shah Bano? What did it give? What did it take away for the Muslim woman? Shah Bano was entitled for a maintenance under 125 CRPC, which is a secular court. What she got was about Rs. 170. That got challenged. Supreme Court upheld it. Muslim community opposed it. And they said, for us marriage is a contract. When a contract ends, there cannot be recurring liability for life. So we will have a new act called Muslim Women's Act. What will Muslim Women's Act give? Muslim Women's Act provided for three months maintenance and a fair and reasonable settlement for life and a lot of courts started giving a fair and reasonable settlement. Sometimes, thirty thousand, sometimes eighty thousand, sometimes one lakh⁹⁹, sometimes three lakhs, depending upon the position the husband and wife are. For me, a three lakh, two lakh or a one lakh settlement is better than a maintenance of 170 rupees. If the woman works, she is not entitled for maintenance. If the woman remarries, she is not entitled for maintenance. If the woman's character is not good, she is not entitled for maintenance. So

⁹⁵ Brahminical law: Law of the Brahmin, the uppermost caste in India's caste system.

⁹⁶ Saptapadi: Seven steps, a Hindu marriage ritual where the husband and wife walk seven circles around a sacred fire.

⁹⁷ Rajkot: a city in the Saurashtra region of the western Indian state of Gujarat.

⁹⁸ Dalit: the lowest, untouchable caste.

⁹⁹ Lakh: a unit in a traditional number system, still widely used in India, equal to one hundred thousand.

this recurring maintenance liability helps the husband to control the sexuality of the wife. (...) But in 2001, when this act was heard by the Supreme Court, the challenges to the act came from the women's groups. The appeals from the high court came from the husbands. What does it indicate? It indicated that it was not working for the husbands, which means that it was working for the wives. So if the act was struck down, all these women who got rights under it, their rights would be wiped out. So what the Supreme Court upheld was the fair and reasonable settlement for life. And today, what the Muslim woman has is a fair and reasonable settlement for life. (...)

Madhu: What is the last word on Uniform Civil Code?

Flavia: Well when I spoke in 1991, I was making a new kind of statement. Unfortunately, the political events of the last decade or so have proved me right. First, the demolition of the Babri Masjid, the attacks on Christian community in Dang, the attacks on Christian missionaries in various places and lastly the Gujarat carnage¹⁰⁰. Whoever, whichever feminist could hold onto the claim of Uniform Civil Code until now, after Gujarat, everybody had to change their stand. (...) Today, gradually, the whole edifice of so-called Uniform Civil Code has crumbled down as far as women's rights groups are concerned, as far as feminist groups are concerned. Where it remains is in the communal segments. So today, anybody supporting this demand has to be not a person from women's rights but invariably would be a communal person.

Madhu: Your last love is MAJLIS. How did you think of it?

Flavia: Well, I didn't think of it myself. Both of us thought about it together along with other people. In fact, MAJLIS is a name selected by you, which has more cultural connotations and implications than what I do in the legal center. But maybe for the time, it was really an apt name which sort of raises the questions of identity, plurality, multi-culturalism. (...)

Madhu: Looking back, do you think MAJLIS is a women's organisation?

Flavia: Well, it has a very strong component of women's rights. But it's a women's rights group with a much more complex form. Where do you build in gender along with minority identity, minority rights? So, gender doesn't become as opposed to minority identity. I think our struggle for the rights discourse within MAJLIS has been how to pose gender and minority rights within a same canvas? The other thing posing gender versus minority identity. And I think that's been the biggest struggle for the legal centre of MAJLIS.

Madhu: But you remember once you said while discussing Women's Centre that Women's Movement was exploring how to do away with or how to deal with authority. How to break formality. And in 90s all of us started, not only MAJLIS, many, many other organizations

¹⁰⁰ Gujarat carnage: The Gujarat riots started after 59 Hindus were killed when a train carrying Hindu pilgrims in February 2002 was set on fire. That attack was blamed on a Muslim mob. In the ensuing reaction to these deaths, Hindu mobs killed nearly 1,000 people, mainly Muslims. Unofficial figures put the death toll at 2,000, but more than twice this number were displaced. Many Muslim women were gangraped. The worst riots since the Babri Masjid riots a decade ago, the Gujarat riots paralysed the city of Ahmedabad.

started like MAJLIS. Could it be that utopianism did not work so we left that agenda or could it be that we learned to deal with authority and formality?

Flavia: Well, I think it is an acceptance that we are not capable of evolving alternated and more egalitarian forms of structures. And if we can't evolve that, maybe it's premature, maybe it requires many more decades of work. And in the meantime, you accept what is there, what is given. So you accept the formal structures, you accept the hierarchy, and for me personally I see it in a way, as a come-down, an acceptance that okay the dream didn't work. It was an illusion and a certain kind of work to do. So you accept this structure and you work in an egalitarian way within a very formal and hierarchical structure. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. But that's the way I think we have tried to cope with it. (...)

Madhu: So what is your relationship with the cultural work that MAJLIS do? (...)

Flavia: When we talk about culture and the legal interventions there, I think we are addressing a much-larger audience. Of changing cultural ethos, of making an intervention about peoples beliefs, values. And I think that's where the change need to come.

Madhu: So how do you get your position now? I mean it has been quite a long journey. So are you still part of the Women's Movement? Or is there one single movement that one can be part of? How do you look at it?

Flavia: I don't think there is a Women's Movement in a sense that we understood in the 80s. There are certain campaigns for women's rights. We come together for certain issues. But I don't think there is a Women's Movement, which speaks in a single voice. And I think its very healthy, this kind of debate within the people who are active on campaigning for women's rights, is a very healthy trend. (...)

Majlis Production: "Do You Know"
[performance about gender and the family]

[song]

Removing the Mask – Rangli, Sangli
Revealing the Face – Rangli, Sangli
They laugh and sing, and teach us a thing
Appearing now, now vanishing!

[Zoom in on a wall of photographs – portraits of the family of Lalmohan Patel. Mr. Patel has recently died. He leaves behind a wife, a son, and three daughters. The portraits begin to speak.]

Brother: Vacate the house in 15 days.

Mother: Where will we go if you set up a factory?

[Elder Sister begins to cry]

Brother: Why weep elder sister? Your True home is your marital home.

Mother: And my home?

Brother: You can stay. I'll need your jewellery for my business.

[Little Sister begins to cry]

Middle Sister: But Chhutki's marriage?

Brother: Ask brother-in-law to help. All that was father's will be needed for my business.

First Magilis Woman [putting a bar across the portrait of Brother]: "I, me, mine!" Nice try, you poor deluded guy!

[A model of Mr. Lalmohan's house appears]

First and Second Magilis Women: This is Mr. Lalmohan's house.

Second Magilis Woman [beginning to divide up the house]: Mother – this is your share. And this is elder sister's. Here, young one, catch!

First Magilis Woman: And that's for middle sister.

Middle Sister: But I'm married!

First Magilis Woman: So? You have an equal share in your father's house.

Middle Sister: I see.[She reaches out from the photograph to grab her share]

Second Magilis Woman: Oh no, you can't sell unless the others agree.

First Magilis Woman: But if you do all sell, each gets an equal share.

Second Magilis Woman: Till then, you can come and stay in your mother's house anytime.

[The two Magilis Women approach the portrait of Brother and remove the bar from in front of it]

Second Magilis Woman: And will this fifth share suit you, brother dear?

Brother: I'll teach you a lesson! [He tries to strike the women, but First Magilis Woman blocks him with the bar]

First Magilis Woman: Sorry, Mister. By law, the others too have a right . . .

Second Magilis Woman: . . . to the property.

Brother: What law?

Mother and Sisters: *Our law!*

First and Second Magilis Women: *Did you know?*

Madhu: Well, Flavia, now the famous last words. What is the future of Women's Rights in the legal system?

Flavia: Well, it is such a broad question. Such a deep question. How I can answer it as a last sentence? There is no one-liner. But I think future of rights depends upon legal strategies. The whole question of rights doesn't depend upon legislation. Getting in new laws, more perfect laws, more feminist laws. I think the future lies in more women being aware of their rights. More

women articulating their rights. More women struggling for their rights in courts and better lawyers strategising for these women so that these rights get actualised. And I think my struggle has been in this direction of creating feminist lawyering in courts at a small level -- district, town, trial courts or even beyond it, local dalits, at panchayats¹⁰¹ etc. that's where women's rights are located. They are not in Delhi, they are not in parliament, they are not in commissions which bring in new statutes.

Madhu: When you look back, Flavia how do you think your relationship with your children have got influenced by all those dramatic twists and turns in your life?

Flavia: How do you say, how it has affected them? Or how it has moulded my life?

Madhu: Or how it has become very specific, very special in your case than anybody else's?

Flavia: I don't know. It is a very complex relationship and it is very different for my son and for my daughters. My daughters have been much closer with me in the struggle. In fact between the daughters also, it is different. Between the elder one and the younger one. And I think at some level, there are certain scars they carry. At some level, I think there is an over involvement in me, or me in them, which may not have been in a very normal kind of upbringing.

Madhu: And the relationship with the son?

Flavia: The relationship with my son is much more complex. Because when I left, I took my daughters, I didn't take my son. And to a certain extent I carry a guilt into that. Though I knew oh! I was doing what was best for him at that period. Which he also thought it was best for him at that period. Nobody knew, nobody thought I would be a success story.

Excerpt from Flavia's poem:

*Having chosen the path,
Why look back?
Dreaming of freedom, again and again,
You've changed directions
Having matured now,
Why be afraid of taking one more step?
Having chosen the path,
Why look back?*

¹⁰¹ Panchayat: village-level government.

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS:
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: INDIA

**Transcript of Neera Desai
Interviewer: C. S. Lakshmi**

Location: Mumbai, Maharashtra, India

Date: 13-15 June, 2003

Language of Interview: English



SPARROW

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Neera Desai, born in 1925, is a pioneer in the field of Women's Studies and a nationally and internationally known scholar. She set up the first Research Centre for Women's Studies in SNDT Women's University, was its first Director, and served in that capacity for many years. Her muchacclaimed research works have been published in Gujarathi and English. She is 78 years old and is currently working on a book based on interviews conducted with more than one hundred feminists in the western region of India on the social construction of feminist ideology.

C.S. Lakshmi (the interviewer) is a researcher in Women's Studies and a Tamil writer who writes under the pseudonym Ambai. She is currently the Director of SPARROW (Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women).

C.S.Lakshmi: Neeraben¹⁰², you have been known as one of the pioneers in Women's Studies and some people even refer to you as one of the mothers of Women's Studies. I don't know how you feel about that. You've written a lot both in Gujarati¹⁰³ and in English about your evolution as a feminist. Could you tell us some of the elements that have gone into this evolution?

Neera: Lakshmi, I feel not only excited but also a little nervous and thrilled that over a period of more than seven decades, I have come to a stage where I can talk something about how I grew up and what has made me a feminist. Each one comes I think through one's own experiences, through one's own environment and through one's own predilections. I have also come through my own background, in which I think one of the initial backgrounds, which has affected my mental makeup and my value structure, is my family. If you just ask me, what was my family background and what was the nature of the family relationship, I think I would say that it was middle class, educated, upper caste¹⁰⁴ family. We lived in Bombay¹⁰⁵. In fact, from the first year of my age, my father shifted to Bombay and that is how my, though I've been born in Gujarat, my entire upbringing has been in Bombay. My father was a professional, he was a solicitor¹⁰⁶ and we had, I would say, a very liberal atmosphere in the house. I was the second in our four siblings. I had an elder brother. I grew up in an atmosphere where my father had political interests, though not affiliations. But it was a political affiliation to the Indian National Congress¹⁰⁷. And my mother, who had hardly studied up to seventh standard¹⁰⁸, in those days I think it was considered to be a highly educated state, she was a very dynamic person and a very progressive woman, a very encouraging mother, with giving freedom to all the children to do whatever they liked.

I would like to say something about my mother which is something very special and which has affected me, till today, is her liberal attitude, her involvement in all good, progressive activities. She took active part in the non-cooperation movement¹⁰⁹, which was in 1930; she went in the morning to those marches, Prabhat Pheris¹¹⁰, as they were called. She used to wear khadi¹¹¹ for

¹⁰² The suffix *ben* to a name is a common way of addressing a woman in the Gujarati community in India. It means "sister" but is used more as a respectful way of addressing a senior person.

¹⁰³ Language spoken by the majority in the Western state of Gujarat.

¹⁰⁴ The caste system is the system of social classes in the Hindu society. The basic castes are Brahmins (priests and teachers), Kshatriyas (Warriors and leaders), Vaisyas (traders and merchants), Shudras (untouchables, polluted labourers). The basic castes were further divided into hundreds of sub-castes on the basis of region, food habits and so on.

¹⁰⁵ Now known as Mumbai, capital of the state of Maharashtra in West India.

¹⁰⁶ Attorney.

¹⁰⁷ The oldest and largest political party in India formed in 1885. It played a major role in the Indian independence movement and has been the ruling party in most of independent India's governments. Leaders include the Nehru family, and the Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh.

¹⁰⁸ Seventh grade.

¹⁰⁹ The movement was initiated by Mahatma Gandhi, who in 1920, began to protest British rule in India through a policy of passive resistance.

¹¹⁰ Meaning "morning rounds", in this context *prabhat pheris* refers to mobilizations in which people walk through the streets singing and chanting to raise awareness of a particular issue or cause.

some time and she used to sell khadi to various people. She took part in all the neighbourhood activities, she took part also in educational activities and this is, I think, the atmosphere, which we all children got-to associate ourselves with the larger interest than merely confining ourselves to the family life. I was, from the beginning, interested in lot of outside activity and I think somehow or the other, the seed of sensitiveness to women's issues were there. I don't know how it came to me, but I think and here I think I would like to describe one incident of my childhood.

You see, I must be about seven or eight years old at that time. We were on vacation in Ahmedabad¹¹² and there was one house opposite our house where a couple was staying and they were a very loving couple in that sense and they would naturally like young girls and children coming to them and meeting and playing in their house because they had no child in their house. So they were very hospitable to me and then, one day, when I'd gone there, the wife was, I think, heating the milk, and there was one friend of her husband had also come. So both the friends were talking with each other very intimately and then he suddenly saw that the milk was boiling and coming to a boiling point and so he just addressed his wife and said that, "Just look at it" and she was talking to me very enthusiastically and [at] the same time, a cat came, and cat overthrew the pot. All these things happened in an instance, but that husband of hers jumped from his seat, gave a big thrashing to his wife and till today, Lakshmi, let me tell you, [that] the screech of that thrash is pinching me. This has remained in my heart very much and perhaps it might be the beginning of some sort of sensitiveness to women's problems, women's issues.

C.S.Lakshmi: Neeraben, which school did you go to?

Neera: In pre-independence period¹¹³ and also the first two decades of the post-independence period, the school has played a tremendous role in building up the consciousness, particularly the consciousness of working for others, nationalist consciousness¹¹⁴ which perhaps later on, we missed. Of course, right now, I would more talk about my school, and it was a nationalist school¹¹⁵, established by Theosophists¹¹⁶ under the influence of Annie Besant¹¹⁷ and others, and as the title suggests, it was called Fellowship School. It was a co-educational school¹¹⁸ and today

¹¹¹ A hand-spun cotton material, which became the symbol of the freedom struggle in India. Mahatma Gandhi inspired people to shun western materials and clothes and khadi also became a symbol of self-rule.

¹¹² The capital city in the state of Gujarat.

¹¹³ India gained independence from Britain on August 15, 1947.

¹¹⁴ Awareness or consciousness of a desire for independence from the British in the late nineteenth century; began the organized move against the British, which culminated in independence in 1947.

¹¹⁵ A school whose primary focus was (in the pre-independence era) the instilling of a nationalist consciousness, central to the "Quit India" movement, the resistance to British rule in India on a national scale.

¹¹⁶ Theosophy, literally "knowledge of the divine", is a body of ideas which holds that all religions are attempts by humanity to approach the absolute, and as such each religion has a portion of the truth. Modern Theosophy, as a coherent system of thought, developed from the writings of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky. Together with Henry Steel Olcott, William Quan Judge, and others she founded the Theosophical Society in 1875.

¹¹⁷ An Englishwoman who came to India in 1893 and adopted it as her motherland. She became part of the Indian resistance against the British in the late 1890s. She was an active reformer in the fields of education, birth control and religion. She set up the Central Hindu College at Varanasi which eventually became the prestigious Benares Hindu University. She created the Theosophical Trust and played a great part in fostering national pride and consciousness. She was president of the Indian National Congress in 1917 and died in India in 1933.

¹¹⁸ A school that both boys and girls attend.

also, many people ask me whether it was a vernacular medium¹¹⁹ or English medium but in those days, these media problems were never there because we learnt through both the languages and so nobody thought about the medium.

C.S.Lakshmi: Neeraben, which college did you go to?

Neera: Lakshmi, before I talk to you about my college, let me say something about the location of the house, more particularly because after the forties, the location of the house has tremendous significance in influencing the mind and bringing us to the hard realities of life. The one hand, to the right hand side of my, our building, there is one lane and then adjacent, there are two houses. The first house is okay, but the second building which is very close, is known as Raj Bhavan¹²⁰ and Raj Bhavan – there are two Raj Bhavans in Bombay. One is the Raj Bhavan where the Governor¹²¹ resides and the other Raj Bhavan is where the Communist Party of India¹²² was located and CPI had its location in Raj Bhavan adjacent to our house and secondly at that time, it was a commune where many of the leaders were staying there. So initially, because the Communist Party was against the war, there was no problem but later on when the Communist Party became the allies, when Soviet Russia became the ally of the British, while the Congress was against the war. Whenever there would be meetings, particularly on Saturdays and Sunday evenings at Chowpatty¹²³, the crowd absolutely armed with stones and other things, would come to that building, throw stones at them and shout anti-war slogans as well as anti-CPI slogans and that was influencing our mind considerably about the nature of the Left Party, confrontation of the political groups. Another important item, I would say important feature of the location, is that our house was in a way, a borderline between the Muslim locality and the Hindu locality¹²⁴. Just two or three buildings on the left, after that, the Muslim locality started. So particularly during the communal riots¹²⁵ and when the communal frenzy was there, we had a very, very tense time. And this is why I would say that in this formative period, the currents of, on the one hand, political rivalries and political debates and discourses were also affecting, and on the other hand, the communal, the communalism and the rabid communalism I would say, was also we were exposed to.

C.S.Lakshmi: Neeraben, the '40s were very turbulent times and I remember 1942 you joined college and those days must have been very interesting, full of different kinds of experiences. Do you think the feminist that you became later, there was, some kind of foundation in these years for that person to emerge?

¹¹⁹ A school where the primary language of learning is the language of the state or any other Indian language, depending on which group has established it.

¹²⁰ The house of the governors of each State.

¹²¹ Head of State appointed by the President of India, s/he is not elected directly by the people unlike the Prime Minister of the country or the Chief Minister of each State.

¹²² (CPI) formed on December 26, 1925 in Kanpur, India; based on Leninist and Marxist socialist ideologies; the CPI (M) or Communist Party of India (Marxist) in West Bengal formally split from the CPI in 1964; various branches of the CPI support and ally with different parties in different states.

¹²³ A popular beach in Bombay.

¹²⁴ Many parts of India exhibit this trend, Muslims and Hindus live apart from each other and form highly segregated communities.

¹²⁵ Riots between diverse religious groups, but most particularly between Hindus and Muslims.

Neera: I think '42 was a very an important year for me for various reasons. One was that for the first time, I joined the college, so coming out of the school precincts, it was a new experience, but very exciting. I joined the Elphinstone College¹²⁶ which has been considered very prestigious and elite college, but also very turbulent college. It was '42; I passed in June. July, the college started and August of the same year, seventh and eighth were the most memorable days, when the Congress under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi¹²⁷ passed the Quit India Resolution¹²⁸. I consider myself very fortunate that I was at that historical meeting. I attended along with my family, that is, my parents were also there, and it was a very exciting moment. But the next day, 9th August, we heard that all the leaders were being arrested and put behind the bars and since then, the new phase in my life started. My, I would say my political involvement, though not party affiliation was never there, but political involvement and political awareness and political concerns, began from that period. Elphinstone College, as I said, was a very, in a way, though elite but yet there were very many nationalist currents in the same college, and so we had lot of student's activism at that time. Actually the principal, when he called the police, there was a lot of protest. Principal cannot call the police in the precincts of an educational institution. The most important or crucial decision time came for me when in the month of November second-term started and I had to decide whether I would be joining the college, paying the fees or not go for the further education, and somehow or the other, I opted for the second. I didn't pay the fees and I said let the year go waste, and according to me, it was not a waste, but for others, definitely and for my future career perhaps it was a little loss but anyway, I didn't join the college. And that is how a young girl of 17 decided to not to continue the college.

C.S.Lakshmi: And her decision was accepted by her family?

Neera: Yes, it was accepted. They said, "Ok fine, if you don't want to join, its okay. It's your decision." But the crucial moment came when I was attending one meeting at Chowpatty. Because that was the meeting where, because Kasturba Gandhi¹²⁹ had expired and Gandhiji¹³⁰ had undergone fast¹³¹, so it was in sympathy with Gandhiji that the meeting was called. It was a huge meeting but suddenly the police cordoned everybody and then we were taken to Gamdevi Police Chowky and then, of course, they couldn't, there was no place in the Arthur Road Jail¹³² for 1,000 women to be accommodated, so they selected and somehow or the other, I also got selected and put under the bars. I with others nearly 25 of us, we were put behind bars. It was for

¹²⁶ Established in the late nineteenth century; considered the seat of "western" education.

¹²⁷ Often referred to as the father of the Indian nation, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948, "Mahatma") led the freedom struggle in India. He was the originator of the non-violent method of struggle called "satyagraha" and the civil disobedience movement. He headed a non-violent movement that finally drove the British out of India on August 15, 1947 and led to the partition of India and Pakistan into two formal countries, with Hindu and Muslim majorities respectively.

¹²⁸ On August 8, 1942, the All-India Congress Committee adopted a resolution sanctioning "the starting of mass struggle on non-violent lines on the widest possible scale under the leadership of Gandhi". The committee demanded the complete withdrawal of the British power from India; the "Quit India" resolution was in effect a call for an open revolt against foreign rule.

¹²⁹ (1872-1944) Wife of Mahatma Gandhi and an important political figure in her own right.

¹³⁰ Gandhi – the "ji" is an Indian suffix used as a mark of respect.

¹³¹ A fast unto death became one powerful way in which Gandhi protested against British rule in the months before India gained independence.

¹³² Largest and oldest jail in Bombay/Mumbai. It houses most of the city's prisoners. Its capacity is 804 inmates but is grossly overcrowded.

a brief period no doubt but it was also a very trying period for me and my family. I must give credit to the family also. Because, first of all, my father did [try to] persuade me that if you want to come out, we can do, there are people who can help us. But I said, “No, I didn’t want to. Let the courts decide what is my fate.”

C.S.Lakshmi: Neeraben, after dropping out for one year, you joined Elphinstone College again. What was the atmosphere like?

Neera: There were new friends who had come up, who were all taking part in the political movement, but they were influenced by the Left politics and Lohia ideology¹³³. So I came in contact with the left group very intimately – we spent a lot of time together in reading, attending study circles and all that and this was also the period when I was considerably influenced by the women leaders during that period, particularly those who were part of the nationalist movement and Left movement for example, Aruna Asaf Ali¹³⁴, she was underground for a long time and I would admire her courage. Similarly, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya¹³⁵ also was a very, I would say some sort of heroine for me in terms of the pattern of life she was living and the boldness with which she was staying alone and all that. And on the other hand, I was also admiring the dramatic talents of Harendranath Chattopadhyaya¹³⁶ because Left influence was very sharp during that period. But one person who has even till today influenced somewhat I would say, my mental make up is one lady called Pushpa Mehta. Now, she was a very young widow, and she was always wearing [a] black sari, and she had been very much touched by the plight of women—she was also a Congress worker. She later became a minister also—but she was the person who started the first rescue home for women¹³⁷ in Ahmedabad. And the way in which she was handling the cases, and the way in which she was sympathetically, and she was for the first time talking about, not criticising the women who were coming out of the house, but giving them shelter and protecting them and making them empowered through education, through earning and other things. What we are talking today, she was experimenting on those lines and I was highly under her influence, the way, the courageous way in which she had been handling the whole problem.

But what I would like to tell you about this phase of my life, the adolescent phase of our life is somehow or the other the total atmosphere, that means our macro atmosphere also of the political

¹³³ Ram Manohar Lohia was a socialist scholar who laid foundation of the Congress Socialist Party, founded 1934. He wrote extensively on the feasibility of a socialist India. Lohia formed a new branch in the Indian National Congress—the All India Congress Committee (a foreign affairs department), through which he helped define India's foreign policy. Lohia wanted to abolish private schools and establish upgraded government schools, which would give equal academic opportunity to students of all castes. This, he hoped would help eradicate the divisions created by the caste system.

¹³⁴ A veteran freedom fighter who was given the Nehru Award for International understanding for 1991 on August 9, 1992, during the Golden Jubilee celebrations of the Quit India Movement.

¹³⁵ A pioneering women’s rights crusader and the leader of the crafts’ movement in India. She became the President of the All India Women’s Conference. She lived an unconventional life, divorcing her husband Harindranath Chattopadhyaya at a time when few women would have dared. After independence, she worked untiringly to save handicrafts and handlooms when Jawaharlal Nehru appointed her as the head of the Handicrafts Board.

¹³⁶ An Indian actor and poet, and also the brother of Sarojini Naidu, who served President of the Indian National Congress and was the first woman governor of free India.

¹³⁷ Women’s shelter.

upheavals, communal and all those things, as well as the family background, they were somehow or the other affecting my psyche, which may not be perceptible at that time, but which has shaped. Because I would like to say at this point of time that this kind of atmosphere was not possible for my other siblings who followed me. So perhaps they were nurtured in a different – the family was the same, the schools and colleges which where they went were not very different, but – the outside atmosphere had completely changed. And so the consciousness which is coming up, not yet of feminism, but of concern for others, and concern for women, I think was built up because of this complex intermingling of factors.

C.S.Lakshmi: Neeraben, what about the impact of Gandhi himself on you?

Neera: Gandhi himself influenced me completely, considerably, I would say, though I would not call myself a Gandhian, but he influenced me considerably in building up values. Though in my book I have evaluated him. I have said that his rigidity in some matters have really somehow or the other affected the Gandhians as well as the movement itself. But – his honesty and his purposiveness of the whole issue and his dedication and his sparkle and candidness – all these things have affected me.

C.S.Lakshmi: Neeraben, marriage is one area where a feminist has to take many important decisions and in India we also have the system of marriages being arranged by parents. In your case how did it happen?

Neera: In my case, I had not arranged marriage¹³⁸, but we selected each other and I think it was of course, as you might say that it was a child marriage¹³⁹, actually, because I was just 20 years when I got engaged and 21 years when I got married. But I met my husband in political study circles and over a period of time, we had some exchanges and we decided to marry. Now the fortunate, or one could say that the convenient, part of the entire relationship was that both of us belonged to the same caste. So the opposition for the inter-caste marriage, or inter-communal marriage, that experience we had not to undergo. In the case of my husband, he was ten years older to me, so that was a bit [of a] factor for anxiety, particular on the part of my parents. As far as the match was concerned, as I said, there were fortuitous circumstances that he was coming from a very good, what would one call, cultured family. His father was a very well known litterateur in Gujarati¹⁴⁰ language. It was also a family which was well-known for its cultural activities, for its hospitality, for its gentleness, for its own identity and individuality and so that way there was nothing to complain. As one says, that there were all factors which could be marked as correct, correct, correct. [Laughter]

C.S.Lakshmi: Did you have a ritualistic kind of marriage?

¹³⁸ System where parents and family choose one's spouse.

¹³⁹ System where children are "married" by parents who perform and take the vows on behalf of the children; the girl is officially sent to her husband's house the day she attains menarche.

¹⁴⁰ Language spoken by the majority in the Western state of Gujarat.

Neera: No, fortunately not...We had the marriage, registration marriage not at the registrar's office, but we had called the registrar [to perform the ceremony] at our house, that is, where Akshay¹⁴¹ was staying, and some friends were witnesses.

C.S.Lakshmi: Neeraben, you got married in 1947, and you decided to have a child ten years later, I think Mihir was born in 1957. So was this decision yours or both you and Akshaybhai had decided that you should have a child much later?

Neera: No, both of us decided, because both of us were very much concerned with our own career. We were also not economically stable; we wanted to have a sort of a firm companionship after which we thought we should have a child. And that was a very, very deliberate decision, and we were able to carry out.

C.S.Lakshmi: Neeraben, your subject for the M.A. thesis was the impact of British rule¹⁴² on the position of women in Modern India. I don't think that women were the subject for a serious study at this point. How did you choose this for your...?

Neera: I and my husband discussed what would be really interesting to me and also would somehow contribute to the thinking process and then we came around this topic of studying...because British rule had just ended, so I thought that I should examine the status of women, how was it during the pre-independence period and what were the forces leading to its change or no change etc. That's how. I got a good guide, Dr. Kapadia from the school of economics. He was a sociologist, and he readily accepted me as a student and so that's how I took up the study.

C.S.Lakshmi: Was it after this that you joined S.N.D.T.¹⁴³? 1954 you joined S.N.D.T. What was the atmosphere like in S.N.D.T.?

Neera: I must tell you something about the beginning of S.N.D.T. University. S.N.D.T. University was started in 1916 by one very renowned social reformer, who was himself not merely a reformer by say profession or vocation, but he was a practitioner. He dared to marry a widow and it is courageous of widow to decide to marry and D.K. Karve or Maharishi Karve is the founder of the university...and there are three features of the university which Karve persistently kept in his mind. One was that he wanted to take higher education to girls. And those girls who were not able to go into a co-educational institution. And that is how, he established a Women's University. The second feature, was that it was that the entire teaching had to be in the regional language, and regional languages at that time were Gujarati and Marathi¹⁴⁴, and later on Hindi¹⁴⁵ was also added. But Gujarati and Marathi were the two languages in which the entire

¹⁴¹ Neera Desai's husband.

¹⁴² The British ruled from 1858-1947.

¹⁴³ Shreemati Nathibhai Damodar Thackersey, a women's university in Bombay.

¹⁴⁴ Language spoken by the majority in the state of Maharashtra.

¹⁴⁵ Language spoken by the majority of Indians in the north (at a little over 40%), adopted as the official language of India.

teaching, even up to post-graduation, was done. And that was pioneering work. The third feature of the university which he also kept in mind, was that many girls come from lower class families, lower-caste families, they may not get the opportunity of coming to the college so he created a facility of paying privately.

C.S.Lakshmi: Neeraben, 1966 was the Golden Jubilee¹⁴⁶ year of S.N.D.T. It was a very memorable year for the University. You were in the University from '54 onwards. So how did you participate in this Golden Jubilee celebration?

Neera: We were some four or five persons in the university who were all working towards women's education and I wouldn't say that all of them were feminists but we had the same cause in our mind. And when we were deciding to have a pattern of celebration of the Golden Jubilee, we said that at the launching of the Golden Jubilee, we will have an exhibition, and that exhibition was to be on Indian Women's March towards freedom. And the closing function was to be the publication of Golden Jubilee volume. Now in both these events, I took very active part and I think that I grew during the entire process. My concept about the women's position, various forces determining the women's status etc., were being crystallised. Not crystallised completely, but were being crystallised at that time. And when the book was released, Zakir Hussain¹⁴⁷ was the President and he came and it was a very, very memorable occasion for the university because for the first time, such a voluminous material on women's education had been brought out by a women's university and I was part of that experiment, I treasure it like anything.

C.S.Lakshmi: Neeraben, you spoke about your thesis. You also spoke about S.N.D.T. University, Now since we are on this issue, I would like to know whether the women's movement in India was a movement that was parallel to the national movement?

Neera: I would say, yes and no, because the main organisation which spearheaded women's issues was All-India Women's Conference, which was established in 1927. Now, it was very paradoxical that [it was] initiated by the colonial administrator in the sense that he said, "Why don't you ask for education? Women should ask for more education for women," and that's how the organisation started. It was blessed by the Maharani¹⁴⁸ and upper-caste Hindu¹⁴⁹ women at that time – most of them were Hindu – but slowly it passed into the hands of women who were very actively participating in the freedom movement. And so the organisation which was started with saying that we will have nothing to do with politics, slowly got from education to social legislation, to political reforms and to Hindu Code Bill¹⁵⁰, which itself was a political issue and which became (remains) till today a political issue. So that way, the women's movement was a part of the nationalist struggle. Those women who were active in both the organisations – Indian National Congress, or even CPI Communist Party of India – they were there and in All India

¹⁴⁶ 50th anniversary.

¹⁴⁷ A musician.

¹⁴⁸ A Maharani is an Indian princess or elite Indian woman.

¹⁴⁹ Polytheistic, codified religious and philosophical system, India's largest religious group.

¹⁵⁰ While a common criminal code exists for every Indian citizen, areas of marriage, inheritance, divorce etc. are governed by separate personal laws for Muslims, Christians, and Hindus, which are based on the distinct religious tenets and customs of each group. The Hindu Code Bill attempted to codify the various Hindu civil laws under a single nomenclature. It was passed in 1956 after much opposition.

Women's Conference, they were more or less the same. And so that kind of interchange and inter-exchange between nationalism and the gender issues was going on. And there were occasions, definitely, where the political leaders, stalwarts like Gandhiji and Jawaharlal Nehru¹⁵¹, were saying that right now the gender question is not important but today, the more important item on the agenda is freedom for the country. And, it was here that some of the women had to, like Amrit Kaur¹⁵², like Kamaladevi had to say that, "No, for us, these are the important issues also." And they were somehow or the other trying to build up the bridge and trying to, I think, inadvertently, influence the political leaders to willy-nilly take up the gender issue, which was very much highlighted and which had a very, according to me, a very important role when the National Planning Commission was appointed in the '40s. Jawaharlal Nehru was the President and K.T. Shah¹⁵³ was one of the important personnel. They had a separate section of National Commission on Women's Role in Planned Economy, which was the first official statement which was being prepared where women's issues – not merely legal, social, educational, but economic issues and her economic empowerment – were also on agenda. So, to that extent I would say that at times they were running parallelly, at times they were crossing with each other, at times they were supporting each other, so all these cross currents were going on.

C.S.Lakshmi: What about the term "feminism" itself? Because I'm asking because when you published your book *Women in Modern India*, you asked one of the women you admired most – Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay – to write the introduction. And in one part of the introduction, she says that this book is wonderful and she has done very good work, but she says that the stand she is taking is a feminist stand. So I want to know how the term 'feminist' was understood at this time.

Neera: Lakshmi, it's good, because I was from the beginning expecting that you should ask me this question since this has been the, I think bothering many people as to how this term "feminism" was used and how it came in my book and if you ask me, I would definitely say that when in 1957 that book was out and Kamaladevi wrote a beautiful introduction but with this proviso about feminism, and she labelled me as a feminist which I think I consider it as a very great tribute rather than a criticism. You see, Kamaladevi was allergic to the term "feminism," not after the '50s, but even in the '40s she was allergic to the term, and she has categorically stated it elsewhere that, "We are not like feminists of the West, we are not anti-men, we are struggling for women's rights, but we want men and women to go together", but her other argument, and I think that although some of those leftists who were allergic to the word "feminism" was more because for them, economic independence, or economic equality, was prior to gender equality. And so, for Marxism also, the destruction of capitalism was more important than destruction of gender inequality. And so for them, to emphasize these gender questions while this whole struggle for economic independence, national independence, is going on, was, I think, diverting the whole history and that is how they were very much opposed to feminist movement. Because feminist movement was highlighting the gender inequality. And I would say that the gender inequality at that time was not as sharply challenged as it was in the '70s. Actually, it was in the liberal framework which they were challenging and they just wanted the equal rights with men.

¹⁵¹ The first Prime Minister of independent India.

¹⁵² The first woman to hold a post in the cabinet as Minister in 1947.

¹⁵³ A socialist economist.

They never challenged “Why this?” or they never asked this question. The movement had never asked this question at that time that what is the root of inequality? They have been always talking like liberals about because men and women are equal, because men have more rights, more opportunities to develop, we should have also the same and this is how the liberal framework and liberal feminism looked at the issue. Along with Kamaladevi, because one of the first statements came in the book called *Our Cause* edited by Shyamkumari Nehru in the late '40s, and there she has written one special article on Women's Movement in India at that particular [time]... and she is, she has categorically mentioned, Amrit Kaur also categorically mentions – many of them – Sarojini Naidu¹⁵⁴ categorically mentions that we have nothing to do with feminism. In spite of the fact that they were, while raising the women's issue, they were being challenged by the men.

C.S.Lakshmi: Can I end this session, or let us say sum it up by saying that the discussion about patriarchy and other things came later because you said that it is within the liberal framework, so the discussion on patriarchy, and the entire issue of patriarchy came much afterwards. Would that be right?

Neera: I think so, I think so.

C.S.Lakshmi: Neeraben, you said that the SNDT University since it was a new University, was open to new ideas and experiments. How did they get the idea to start the Research Unit on Women's Studies?

Neera: One of the important events for the university, which happened after the Golden Jubilee was the event when they were celebrating the centenary celebrations of the donor, Vithaldas Thackersey, and as a part of the celebrations, they, we had planned actually to have a round table on what should be the future of a women's university. Because in '16 it was okay to have a women's university. To continue for 60 years, it was fine, because still the demand was there for the girls to stay, learn in a separate institution. But in the '70s or the late '60s, what was the rationale for continuing the women's university only open to women and there was a lot of discussion on that day. Many educationists, many political workers, many academicians had come, and one thing they said, that you cannot close the university, that means you cannot have men enter, it has to be retained as a women's university, but the stance has to change. The other thing which happened at that time which was also a very, one would say, a contributory cause in developing this kind of a ideology, was that Prof. Nurul Hasan, who was an Education Minister at that time, came to give convocation address and in the convocation address he said that S.N.D.T. has served its purpose very well, and now S.N.D.T. should go in for research and action. That was also the suggestion given by Nurul Hasan. And in all this atmosphere of giving a new direction to the university, accidentally an opportunity came in 1974, March when... a very meagre, to this day it is a very meagre funding which came, and it was suggested that we should use it for researches on women and that is how on the 2nd July, 1974, Research Centre for

¹⁵⁴ An eminent poet and one among the most visible leaders of pre-Independent India. She was the President of the Indian National Congress and the first woman governor of free India.

Women's Studies¹⁵⁵ was started and I became the first director of that centre. The term came much later. We called it to Research Unit. Because even somebody could ask me – why did you call it Women's Studies at that time? Because what do you mean by Women's Studies or what was the meaning of Women's Studies at that time? So I have no answer, I have really no answer how this term we used, but it was a very common terminology in the West, and perhaps those influences which were coming, 1975 was also on the threshold – International Women's Year and all that, but we called it Research Centre—Unit—on Women's Studies and after the UGC¹⁵⁶ – after more than ten years – the UGC accepted it or legitimised its existence, we changed the nomenclature into Research Centre on Women's Studies.

C.S.Lakshmi: Neeraben, you have been writing a lot and speaking a lot about Women's Studies being a subject that is not purely theoretical. The understanding of Women's Studies has to come linked with action. I want to know whether this was a position taken by the Research Centre which was really your position because you started it or was it the position taken by all Women's Studies centres?

Neera: Lakshmi, the link with the action has been one of the important, I would say, features of Indian Women's Studies. The Western concept has always been, from the beginning, more theoretical, because they started with *teaching* Women's Studies. We have come to *teaching* Women's Studies at a much later date. Even in the 1981 conference¹⁵⁷ -- the first conference on Women's Studies -- which we held in the city of Bombay, at SNDT University, as far as the aims of Women's Studies were concerned, we have said that it is research, action and teaching. At least Research Centre on Women's Studies and myself and some others, our colleagues particularly of my generation, we have always been feeling that Women's Studies has to be linked with action because without knowing the pulse of the situation, you cannot merely theoretically understand the subject or understand the problem. It is not merely the study – we are not merely interested in theoretical understanding of the position, but we want to change the structure, change the system, change the laws and whatever it may be coming in the way of women's status, and that is where I think, action comes. And it is at this point, I would say, that it comes in violent conflict with the mainstream subjects. Because they are, as I told you earlier also, that they state that social sciences have to be value-free. Now value-free means, because when you say that you have to change, then you have to have some values – change for what? Change of what? Change where? Now, all these things have to come if you accept that there is some concept, there is something in your mind, to which you want to goad all the action. And it is there I think, that the action component is very important for Women's Studies.

C.S.Lakshmi: Neeraben, a linked question that I would like to ask is that when you speak very often and when you write, you use Women's Studies perspective and feminist perspective alternately. For you, there's no difference. But I think that this is not the case with Women's Studies centres all over India. For you Women's Studies has always stood

¹⁵⁵ Established in 1974; has pioneered the introduction of Women's Studies in the Indian University system; carries out research, teaching and outreach programs in Women's Studies.

¹⁵⁶ The University Grants Commission is a statutory body of the Government of India, which is responsible for the coordination, determination and maintenance of standards of university education in India. It allocates public funds to the central universities and other universities and institutions of higher learning.

¹⁵⁷ National Conference on Women's Studies held in Bombay.

for feminist perspective. This feminist perspective must have evolved over the years with exchanges from various scholars all over the world. Can you tell us about this, the journey of acquiring perspective?

Neera: Surely, because, as you rightly say, I use the term alternatively, depending upon the context, and the perspective, whatever we might call it – Women's Studies' perspective or feminist perspective – which I have derived has been over a period of time. And one of the books which had influenced me at that time was by Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein on women's two roles in society¹⁵⁸. Because for the first time this question, of middle class women coming into the arena of work, and therefore the problem of conflict and adjustment and everything was being highlighted. And from that perspective slowly I was developing this whole idea, and whole notion, that women's status has been affected by the patriarchal society structure and how, and to this concept, to come, I have travelled a long journey. And not that these terms were unfamiliar to me, because in anthropology, we do study patriarchy, and patriliney and matriliney and all that but in this adequate perspective, it came to me over a period of time, and in this, many experiences which I had undergone, helped, and one of the important exposures which I had was during three years – that is '77, '78, and '79, to '80, when I attended various conferences abroad and came in contact with the feminists who were looking at the issue from the whole question of patriarchy and capitalism, both. And that is how I was exposed to liberal feminists, the radical feminists and the socialist feminists.

So this was the exposure which I got, and through these exposures and then, before that, there was one experience which I had in our country that in '75, which was in a way, the year of Emergency¹⁵⁹ and in that year there was a conference in October, at Pune¹⁶⁰, organised by Gail Omvedt¹⁶¹ and others, of women of more oppressed categories – and of course, others had also come, but for the first time to attend such a gathering where prostitutes would also be there, where students will be also there, where teachers would be there, where political activists would be there, it was also a very great experience for me.

C.S.Lakshmi: Neeraben, could you tell us about the action programme that the research centre has done so far?

Neera: Research Centre started in '74 and within 2 years, because we, as I said to you, we were always thinking of doing action. And the major action programme started in '77-'78 and that was in an area South of Bombay, 180 kilometres. away, which is called Udwarda. And we took first seven Villages in Udwarda, and there, first we had the survey of that region to find out what are

¹⁵⁸ This book is called *Women's Two Roles: Home and Work*, and was published in 1956.

¹⁵⁹ On June 21, 1975, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was found guilty of election fraud by the Indian High Court. She was ordered to leave her seat in Parliament and banned from running for an additional six years. Instead, Indira Gandhi declared a State of Emergency, and in her own words brought democracy "to a grinding halt". Invoking article 352 of the Indian Constitution, she granted herself extraordinary powers and launched a massive crackdown on civil liberties and political opposition. Indira's emergency rule lasted nineteen months, when Indira Gandhi suddenly announced the next general election in March, and released her opponents from prison. The emergency was not revoked until March 23, 1977.

¹⁶⁰ A city in the Indian state of Maharashtra.

¹⁶¹ Born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Gail Omvedt has been a citizen of India since 1982. She is a scholar-activist, working with new social movements, in particular women's groups and farmer's organizations.

their needs, and what are their demands for change. And then, it was a beginning of the programme. And later on, the entire programme was built up on empowering and conscientising women, particularly the lower-caste women to their situation. But the more important question was of making them aware of the situation. So we had various programmes – training programmes, seminars and group discussions and training programmes to make women aware. Starting from seven to nine villages, today the coverage is to more than 50 villages. And craft centre and many things have come up there. But I would also like to emphasize that when we accepted the basic philosophy that action has to be the part of our consciousness raising and our understanding of women's status, action also means supporting other's action, and supporting and also participating in those activities which have been undertaken by other women's groups to change society. And this is how I personally, and the centre, came into close contact with the activist groups of those period, which might be still continuing. And it is as a part of this only, I have been attending most of the activist conferences which have been held in the country. I have been benefiting. That doesn't mean I agree with everything they are saying, or, I share their way of analysis of everything or share their method of solving the problem, but I do share with them the sensitiveness and the concern they are showing towards the women's issues. We started Women's Studies by saying that we are going to speak their language, we are going to speak poor women's language, or the language which they would understand, the idiom which they would understand, but today what we are speaking is something which even we don't understand. So what has happened to the praxis? And this is a very big dilemma which is going on in my mind, but that doesn't mean that I have lost faith in the action part.... My firm belief is that you cannot segregate theory from practise. Both of them go together, and somehow or the other, the centre or the scholar has to exhibit or manifest that there is concern for both. Because merely talking about action, I don't think has any value.

C.S.Lakshmi: Neeraben, from your experiences of interaction with women of various levels you must have come across many interesting happenings and experiences. Could you tell us about them?

Neera: You see, one of my students became a widow. Now, my student becoming a widow means she was not even 20 years old. So, I went to her house with some of my students. When I went there, I had expected that she would be very much, that she might not be seen also in the room, she might be sitting in some corner and still I see her decked in ornaments and beautiful zari¹⁶² sari¹⁶³ and all that. And I got the shock of my life. When I asked one of my students, how is it then that she is dressed like this, and they said that the custom of the caste is that for ten days, till it is supposed that the body – the soul –, remains in the area, she will be behaving as if she is the wife of that person. But after that, she will be widow. And so, the tragedy and the contradiction of the entire situation came to my mind that when a person is in a state of mind when one is not thinking about ornaments or dress or zari or whatever it may be, you make her wear. And then after some time, you completely see that she doesn't touch those things or doesn't think about those things. Now what kind of social system is it? It is absolutely insensitive to women's feelings and women's mind, what she must be undergoing. You presume that she

¹⁶² A very elaborate sari with gold thread embroidery on it, usually worn at weddings.

¹⁶³ A sari is a 6-9 feet long material that many Indian women drape around themselves—together with the *salwaar kameez*, the most popular Indian women's clothing.

doesn't have any feeling or she doesn't have any thought. So this was one very shocking experience, which I had. Another eye-opener was when I was working in the slum area. And when some women, one of the women was beaten by her husband and who was drunk and all that, then she was telling me that, "Yesterday he had beaten me and these are the scars and all that." I said that you are living in a community and a neighbourhood where you can leave your husband – all these inhibitions and taboos are for our middle class people, where we cannot leave the battering situation. But you can. Why are you not going out and just throwing him away or just leave the situation? And then she told me that "No, we know we cannot bear the situation, but madam, when we stay in the house, we are facing one wolf, but when we will go out we will have to face 100 wolves." So they are aware of the reality, that there are people who are ready to pounce upon them, and so this is a negotiation, this is a decision which they have consciously made. And the last experience, which I have been, so to say, exposed in a very different way, and that has also touched my psyche so much, I must say. This was when I was doing one research field study with one activist – very good activist, very sensitive activist and very live – perhaps you might be knowing her – Shiraz Balsara.

C.S.Lakshmi: Yes, you did the caste study with her.

Neera: Yes, caste study – So Shiraz and I were going in a village where the woman was belonging to the Nayaka community – the lower-caste – and she, her husband was so torturing her, so battering her, and she was the mainstay of the family, she was earning. And then what happened, one day, the husband also tried to poison her. Meanwhile, she developed a relationship with a poojari¹⁶⁴ and that poojari was very sympathetic to her and that must have upset the husband. And husband wanted to marry somebody, but that for him was okay, but his wife going with the poojari was not tolerated. So suddenly she left her home and the poojari helped her, somehow or the other. Then they had the caste council, the tribal council, where the divorce had to be given, because she asked for separation, she said that "I don't want to stay with this man who is a danger to my existence itself." So, in this situation, which is very, very eye-opening, when the *Panch*, that is the main person, he asked her as to, "What are you going to do?" She said, "My husband purchased my body with 500 rupees.¹⁶⁵ I am returning those 500 rupees and I am reclaiming my body."

C.S.Lakshmi: Neeraben, whenever we talk of the '80s, we always talk of them as '80s – "the vehicle of hope" but many young people ask me, "So what happened in the '80s that you people talk about hope?" Because they are facing the hard realities of today. So what do you think are the events that made us hopeful in the '80s?

Neera: You see, I think mid-'70s, the women's movement started. According to some it was the second phase of the Indian women's movement, or the third phase of the Indian women's movement. But after the '70s, the movement became very, very loud, in the sense, visible. And there was also a lot of visibility in terms of action both in the court of law, in the legislature, and, on the street. There was Mathura rape case¹⁶⁶, there were dowry deaths and our struggles against

¹⁶⁴ A priest.

¹⁶⁵ Currency of India. As of 03/08/05 roughly 43 rupees=\$1USD.

¹⁶⁶ The story of Mathura, a 16-year-old tribal girl who was raped by two policemen, became the impetus for reform in India's rape laws. A court acquitted the accused, stating that Mathura had eloped with her lover and that as she

dowry¹⁶⁷, there was the problem of, and the whole issue of female foetus being killed, there was the issue of media projection and lot of protests against the media projection of women. Even in literature, and even in the classrooms, many of these questions were being raised. Actually, two events were happening simultaneously also, of solidarity. One was the organisation of the Women's Studies, which was started actually in 1981, and every two years we had the conference on Women's Studies. And if we look at the agenda of the conference, if you look at the issues which were taken up by the conference from '81 onwards, we will be feeling that the academia interested in Women's Studies has been really questioning the subordination, or the gender question. And this gender question was asked not merely in terms of family surroundings, but in terms of the wider society, the macro society. Similarly, there were conferences held by the autonomous women's groups also, and they were also raising all these questions of violence, of the way in which solidarity has to be built up, how do we survive. Then they were also asking the questions like lesbianism, like single mothers, like problems of survival in patriarchal hegemonic society – so all these questions were being asked and all these questions were asked at both the levels, so there was all round atmosphere of activity, all round atmosphere of not only discussion, but action going on. And today, many times I think there is some reason and some justification for feeling that that fervour, that kind of enthusiasm, and that kind of just spending one's life for a cause, is gone, or is not visible.

C.S.Lakshmi: Do you think it's because the '90s have been disturbing, in terms of various events that have occurred?

Neera: Because what is really happening is that – actually the 90s were the watershed in a way – various problems came up – both at the theoretical level, and at the action level. Theoretical level, the issues were like “dominance of culture”, and in the perception of the Women's Studies scholars, and so what happened, that with the coming of post-modernist thinking also, the whole emphasis was laid on difference rather than solidarity. It is the whole concept of difference which started in the conference, at Calcutta conference I must say, when for the first time this issue was raised – who speaks for whom and can we speak for everybody? – Can a Hindu woman speak for all the women, or all women have to speak in their own voices. Now these are the issues which have come up. At times they are real, but at times they are, according to me, exaggerated. Because it is not always necessary for an individual to experience exploitation – we can imagine also the suffering of the exploitation. So similarly one can speak for “the others”. Now, how much one is speaking how much one is – these are all the problems. So this was one issue which was coming up, and which has been dominating the Women's Studies scholars for a

was “habituated to sexual intercourse,” the policemen could not have raped her. It further ruled that Mathura was a liar and that intercourse had occurred with her consent. But a high court convicted the accused, saying that mere surrender did not mean consent. However, the Supreme Court set aside the high court judgement and acquitted the policemen. That court ruled that Mathura had raised no alarm, there were no visible injuries on her body and hence her allegations of rape were untrue. The judgement outraged women's groups and triggered a major campaign for changes in rape laws.

¹⁶⁷ Dowry is a kind of payment made in cash and kind to the bridegroom's family by the bride's parents at the time of the marriage. The brides' family's inability to satisfy the demands of bridegrooms' families started the phenomenon of dowry harassment, violence and consequent deaths (murders) of brides at the hands of their in-laws. The movement against dowry in India began around 1977 when dowry deaths started being reported. It began in North India, and gradually women's organizations from all around the country joined the movement.

long time, and there is a section who has been influenced. And on the other hand, the divide is of communalism and which is taking a violent form. It requires a great mental courage and mental strength to say that in spite of this we are one because we are all exploited. We are all suffering, whether we are Hindu, Muslim, Christian, whatever, or whether we belong to it may be upper caste, lower caste, middle class, intermediary caste or tribal. Because all these people are today, all these differences are being utilised by the ruling groups. And to some extent we fall prey to all these divisive factors.

C.S.Lakshmi: Neeraben, you have spoken at length about the past and the contemporary reality of the existence of women and the kind of stands that feminists have taken over the years. But I know that you have also spoken about an emerging new solidarity'. As a feminist, how do you see this new solidarity emerging, from what quarters, from what areas of our experience is this new solidarity going to arise?

Neera: I think that the new solidarity – I see glimpses of solidarity coming up and consciousness being raised, the group actions being taken at various situations. I have seen solidarity being built up in fighting communalism. Particularly I have some experience and some information on the Gujarat riots¹⁶⁸, and I know that there are young women and even younger girls who have been taking part in the rescue operations, in relief operations, and they are looking at the problem not from the communal divide, but communal harmony. My own feeling is, and my own gut understanding is that – because this I also saw during the earth-quake; the way in which young groups – I myself had gone there so I could witness young groups, and both boys and girls taking part in the entire rehabilitation, re-building of the Kutch¹⁶⁹ area. And so, I personally think that we cannot afford to lose hope. We have to have hope in the goodness of the human beings, in the need that everybody will have to survive to get – however the problems which are coming up. Because human rights has been right now one area where all the groups are combining.

My own feminism – I would definitely like to say something and end up the entire discourse, is that I understand feminism in one way as a struggle against exploitation. But this is exploitation of the gender. And it is overthrowing patriarchy and building up a society which will be free of the oppression. But my, also, feminism tells me, somehow or the other, because of my upbringing, because of my middle-class background, or whatever it may be, that – and that is my personality also – that one need not be assertive, one need not be very loud in one's behaviour and yet one can be firm in one's viewpoint. And that has made some people doubt whether because of my exteriority, because I wear a sari which is a very traditional type, I do not cut my hair, I do not have short hair, I do not wear the modern dresses, and I do not perhaps smoke also or drink, I may not be as feminist. But I don't know, for me, these are the exteriors – some people may have those exteriors with them. I have my own values, I have my own behaviour pattern, and I have my own ways of expressing my concern for the solidarity of women, and my belief in solidarity and my belief in the younger generation is very, very firm and very solid.

¹⁶⁸ The Gujarat riots started after 59 Hindus were killed when some people set fire to a train carrying Hindu pilgrims in February 2002. That attack was blamed on a Muslim mob. In the ensuing reaction to these deaths, Hindu mobs killed nearly 1,000 people, mainly Muslims. Unofficial figures put the death toll at 2,000, but more than twice this number were displaced. Many Muslim women were gang-raped. The worst riots since the Babri Masjid riots a decade ago, the Gujarat riots paralysed the city of Ahmedabad.

¹⁶⁹ On January 26, 2001, an earthquake devastated the landscape and lives of the people of Kutch Desert in the Indian state of Gujarat.

The End

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**GLOBAL FEMINISMS:
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: INDIA

**Transcript of Ima Thokchom Ramani Devi
Interviewer: Binota Loitongbam and Esther Chinnu**

Location: Imphal, Manipur, India

Date: 26-27 November, 2005

Language of Interview: Manipuri



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Ima Thokchom Ramani Devi, born in 1930, is currently the General Secretary of All Manipur Women's Reformation and Development Samaj. The Samaj was registered in 1978. There was no office as such. It kept shifting from one place to another. The last office the Samaj occupied was demolished and currently the Samaj is temporarily located in the green room of an amphitheatre in Imphal. The Samaj has taken up several issues like banning of alcohol, rape, individual cases of women, and the Armed Forces Special Powers Act. Ima Thokchom Ramani Devi belongs to the Meitei community and has studied only up to the primary level. In her growing up years she learnt to weave, dance and sing. 27th August 1965, which is still observed as the Hunger Marchers' Day, was her first initiation into action to demand rights. She is currently known for the struggles she has waged with her group for the cause of women and for the cause of peace in the region.

Binota Loitongham and **Esther Chinnu** (interviewers) are in charge of the Imphal branch of the North East Network, which is an organisation that networks with people and groups in the North East to bring important issues to the forefront, especially human rights issues being raised by the women's groups.

Ima Thokchom Ramani Devi Transcript

Binota: Ima, tell us where you grew up and also about your parents?

Ima: My mother got married in Loklaobung, Moirangkhom.¹⁷⁰ I was born there. When I was seven to eight months old, my father went to Mau to study; he took a second wife with him. At that time in Moirangkhom there was sparse settlement. Mother, my paternal grandmother and myself stayed together. We couldn't stay there; so my mother took me back to her maternal home in Thongam Leikal where I grew up. My paternal grandmother went to live with her married daughter. When I was seven or eight years old in Thongam Leikai, there was a first time bombing in the Japanese war.¹⁷¹ I fled to Thoubal at the first instance of bombing. When we were fleeing during bombing to Thoubal, as I was still a kid, I couldn't walk all the way, my mother at times gave me a ride on her back. We also took rice to eat on the way. We stayed in Thoubal for more than a year. Then, we returned to Thongam Leikai for a while. There was a second bombing and we ran to Wangoi. Then there was no transportation, so we walked. While walking we crossed the Heirangoithong bridge. Heirangoithong was a thatched bridge then. We kept resting and eating rice on the way. We stayed in Wangoi for some years. (...)

Binota: When your father left, how did your mother raise you up, how did you grow up?

Ima: After my father left, I grew up in Thongam Leikai. I was my mother's only child. The school was destroyed in the war. As I was an only child, my mother was concerned that I might fall into the pond, or get hit by cows on the way to school. So I couldn't study, although I wanted to. Thus my mother raised me by weaving clothes. My maternal uncle was the only son, he also had only one daughter. So, my mother used to weave and I used to participate in the community music like *Shumang Leela*¹⁷² and *Sanjenba*¹⁷³. I used to sing and also weave. We grew up like that. As young girls, we courted young boys as it was prevalent at that time. The elders advised us not to elope. The young boys agreed to send their elders for asking my hand, but if my parents refuse, we have to elope. I was afraid of elope; I said I cannot elope. I was also not so serious about any of the boys, though used to court them. So, after three years of efforts by the elders to arrange, I got married at this place, Heirangoithong.

Binota: Ima, you said about courting at that time, could you elaborate about the courtship.

Ima: Courting at that time meant, three or four bachelors visiting the girl's home together. They came in a dhoti¹⁷⁴ and used to remove their chappal¹⁷⁵ in the front yard. The elders used to announce that guests have come and ask us to spread the mat and we girls used to spread the mat

¹⁷⁰ These are locations within Manipur, which is a small, landlocked state in a mountainous area in the extreme north-east of India, on the border of Myanmar.

¹⁷¹ This is a reference to World War II, as experienced in this location.

¹⁷² 'Shumang' means 'open courtyard' and 'leela' means play; the literal meaning of Shumang leela is "play of the open courtyard". It has affinity with proscenium theatre in form, however, it is performed in an open courtyard surrounded by spectators on all four sides.

¹⁷³ a traditional Manipuri classical opera ballet for children

¹⁷⁴ Garment worn by Indian men, wrapped around the lower part of the body.

¹⁷⁵ Leather sandals.

and offer tobacco when the elders told us to. While we sat, sometimes three or four other boys used to come for courting. Knowing others have come these three boys would leave and the other three would sit down. The boys were welcomed like any other guest to the family and offered tobacco. They came wearing dhoti and chaddar¹⁷⁶ and left their chappal in the front yard before entering. So that was it. We used to spend time playing *Likkol*, a game between girls and boys. So while playing, when the boys proposed to me and persuaded me to elope, I refused. They were ready to send their elders to ask my elders but in case they refused, they requested me to save their honour, which meant, to elope. But, elopement at that time, as elders told us, involved running and hiding, I was afraid of. So I said I could not elope. Then the elders arranged a match for me with a total stranger. The arrangement took three years. At first there is *mangolkakhatpa*, where the two families get to know each other, then *waroipot*¹⁷⁷, and then *heijingpot*¹⁷⁸, only then the marriage took place. It was considered fashionable to carry the bride on an elephant, so the groom's side hired an elephant. My uncle said that one can ride the elephant anytime if one had the money, but one only rides the doli¹⁷⁹ once; so there was some argument. But I was carried on the elephant. They kept the elephant ready at the gate. When I came out in the bridal dress, the heavy border of the dress must have touched the elephant. While kneeling down the elephant roared so loudly that I just ran off holding up my bridal dress. Everyone shouted, 'Stop, stop!' Then I sat on the elephant. Its skin was very hard and scratchy. I sat in front with someone behind me. There used to be a two-rupee coin with a hole in the centre and during the ride from Sinjamei Keithel to Heirangoithong Keithel. I threw the coins all the way. I lived in Heirangoithong Makha in Awang Maibam Leikal locality. (...)

Binota: At what age did you marry, and how was your married life?

Ima I married at the age of 17. After I had two children, my parents were reunited. After my third child my husband got another wife. When he brought the second wife, I wasn't comfortable staying with them. So I asked him to leave the house with the second wife saying, I don't want to see them. He went to stay at his wife's maternal home. Four, of us—my three children and myself—stayed back. I was pregnant with my fourth child then. When my delivery time came, I asked him to stay with me during the delivery and go after the house was clean again. As we stayed with the elders, many things had to be taken into consideration like purity and pollution taboos. (...) So, you see, I faced a lot of hardship during those times when he had the second wife. He went away to stay with the second wife and I stayed with my four children. After the baby was born she was there for around four to five years. She didn't have any children. After that they separated and she got married to another man. She has no children till today. When I got married, my husband's family were doing well, but after my fourth or fifth child—fifth child—we were very poor; it was very difficult. We ate in the morning, skipped the evening meals, or skipped the morning food and ate only in the night etc. Then, during those times... we... I should say this later... we used to starve then. Those were difficult times. Even if we had money, there was no rice available. At night the child cried at the breast as there was no milk, due to starvation. The baby used to cry as it couldn't sleep. So, I had to keep the baby on my

¹⁷⁶ Shawls worn by men and women in this region.

¹⁷⁷ The next stage when the groom's family members bring food and the contract is finally sealed.

¹⁷⁸ Finally the engagement is declared amongst the friends and relatives, and friends and relatives from the boy's side then go to the girl's parents with food, fruits and presents. The girl's parents also invite their friends and relatives.

¹⁷⁹ The bridal carriage.

back and I used to spend the night sitting on the stool, keeping my hands like this. My husband was a little understanding then as the second wife was not anymore with him. (...)

Binota: Ima, can you tell us about the andolan¹⁸⁰ on 27 August 1965.

Ima: In the year 1965, rice was very scarce; it was at the time of Moirang Koireng¹⁸¹. Money was there but there was no rice to buy; many were starved at that time. Rice was so scarce that people ate paddy without seeds after grinding and frying it. Rice was not rationed. We came up to the Chief Minister, Moirang Koireng's bungalow as ration cards were promised. Many students also came up to the bungalow shouting, "We are hungry, give us rice." We first went to the Chief Minister's bungalow, demanding cards. Moirang Koireng went inside the bungalow as many people tried to surround him. We dragged him out of the bungalow; we dragged him out and shouted demanding rice. Then he went to the Governor's place. Those days it was walled with thorns not cemented like today. He told us to go to Kangjeibung and wait saying he'd distribute the cards there and went inside. Hoping to get the cards we sat there with the girl students. But he never came out.

We were enraged. All of us women and the students went and surrounded the governor's bungalow. When we surrounded the bungalow, they went and hid inside. So Promodini, Choubhan and Nabakumar, all of them drove inside the bungalow in the jeep. My seven or eight-month-old baby was on my back. I had nowhere to keep her. They told us that tear gas would be released and that we should remain still and not run in fear. But as I had my baby with me, I was afraid the smell of gas will harm the baby. So, I came out hastily through the northern gate of the governor's bungalow. As I came out and walked a little, I saw a rickshaw; I came back. When I neared the post office area, there was firing, but luckily I wasn't there with my baby. That was when Nabakumar, Choubhan, Pramodini and many died. There was trampling and firing and many got stuck in the thorns, many were injured. Those were hard times. That was the time of Moirang Koireng. That day he came after inaugurating the Kangchup Bridge. He had a long sindoor¹⁸² on his forehead. I was there in that andolan¹⁸³ that day.
(...)

Binota: Ima, can you tell us about the women's movement in the past?

Ima: We observe every year that protest for rice as *Chaklaam Khongchat*, or march by hungry people. Other than that, there was this incident due to rice scarcity called *Nupi Lan*¹⁸⁴ when I was a young girl. They had exported the rice to many different places but we had no rice. There were elders called Shabi, Tungbu and many others... I forget the name of Kasturi's son... the Kasturis said that Manipuris should be given their feet's dust. The Kasturis had sent away the rice in all

¹⁸⁰ Political protest or movement

¹⁸¹ Moirang is a district situated in the north east of India. During World War II, Moirang was the headquarters of The Indian National Army (I.N.A) or Azad Hind Fauj. The INA was an auxiliary force to the Imperial Japanese Army in its southern mainland campaign during the Second World War. Shri Koireng Singh was a member of the INA and was Chief Minister of Manipur.

¹⁸² Red mark on forehead between the eyes (also called bindi); sign used in Hindu religion indicating the mystic third eye; applied to both men and women. The same mark is also used to indicate married status in women.

¹⁸³ Movement or protest.

¹⁸⁴ Women's war; in this case, a protest against rice policies (1939), but Manipuri women engaged in several different "nupi lan" recounted in this interview. See also <http://themanipurpage.tripod.com/culture/women.html>

directions, so there was no rice for the people. The elder women tried to stop the rice export to all directions. There was a struggle, that is the *Nupi Lan* as we know today and we have the memorial complex. We were still young then, so we were not part of that incident but the elders used to tell us—‘Thangjam Mill is destroyed, rice mill is destroyed’ and so on. There was also another incident narrated by the elders, I don’t know, whether it should be before or after... Earlier, Bor Saheb’s house was burnt down. But it wasn’t due to rice scarcity. They couldn’t determine how and where it started, so were not able to accuse and punish anybody. So from one of the Manipuri house, they bought out some hay, sticks and wood and the Bor Saheb forced the men to build the house as a punishment. They were told to get wood from the Kabaw valley to build the house. They began to torture the men. Then the women got angry. They agitated in front of the Nambul river bridge throwing hay, sticks etc. That was a women’s andolan as narrated by the elders, Those are the two women’s wars. After that we came. After many issues, we took up Nishabandhi.

Binota: Ima, tell us how the Nishabandhi¹⁸⁵ movement started and later how it came to be called known as the Meira Paibis?

Ima: Before we actually started Nishabandhi there were many cases. There was a drunkard who came home and killed his wife and threw her in the river at night. We found the body in the morning. In another incident, a man stabbed his wife after drinking. Another drunkard jumped in the water to take bath and died. There was a young girl who became blind after her drunken father stabbed her in the eye with a knife. There were many incidents of stabbing and fighting during *Thabal Chongba*¹⁸⁶ and other festivals. They would drink a quarter but act as if they’ve consumed a full bottle and they seemed to become more wild after seeing us. Then around 1974, we started working against alcoholism. At first there was Mukhra Sana’s prohibition work. Their work was different. We began as alcoholism was still not banned. We started when Indira Gandhi¹⁸⁷ was there. We started working seriously around 1975. We began to form small associations in every locality and started fighting alcoholism from all directions, from Top Khongnangkhong, Noariya Pakhang Lakpa, Langthabal, all the places. Thongju, Kongba and in nearby places. How we caught the culprit was—they used to dig a corner and hide the bottles there, covered with firewood. They filled the water bags with alcohol and put them on the bed under the pillow. They also stored it in water pots pretending that it was drinking water. This was the way we began to catch hold of them. In other places, in the tribal Christian areas also, Nishabandhi work started. We went to Chandel, they dug a long pit, dumped the bottles there and covered it with a wooden plank and a man was sleeping on top of it holding a vitamin syrup bottle pretending to be sick. We made him stand up and found those bottles. We made him empty the bottles. We also found big brewing pots. We were naïve then, so we took them to the Sub Inspector, who gave us Rs.5¹⁸⁸ as reward. In Chandel, we emptied the brewing pots with

¹⁸⁵ It was in 1975 that women in large numbers started anti-liquor movement in urban as well as in rural areas. The women in groups at this stage were known as Nisha Bandhis and their organization as Nisha Bandh Organization.

¹⁸⁶ Thabal Chongba is a popular Manipuri folk dance associated with the festival of Holi. The literal meaning of Thabal is 'moonlight' and Chongba means 'dance', thus 'dancing in the moonlight'. Traditionally conservative Manipuri parents did not allow their daughters to go out and meet any young men without their consent. Thabal Chongba therefore provided the only chance for girls to meet and talk to the boys. In earlier times, this dance was performed in the moonlight accompanied by folk songs.

¹⁸⁷ Former Prime Minister of India.

¹⁸⁸ Five rupees (small unit of currency).

fermented rice. It made the people there angry. Momon was the General Secretary, Choubi was the President and I was the Publicity Secretary, Taruni was the Vice President then. During our fight, as we had thrown away their alcohol, they were angry. Momon and myself went to the SI's office. There were around thirty-four-thirty-five tribals in one room. At first, one of them came out and then two or three came out and suddenly grabbed Momon's hair and pulled her. It was so sudden that Momon fell and they started beating her with sticks. I tried to prevent the blows like this; while preventing I got bruised, my glasses were broken and one of my earrings got lost. Then the OC came out and they arrested fifteen of them. Although they were released we took thirteen of them to the court and we won the case. They were proved wrong. There was also a man, Rabei, from Heirangoithong. We caught him in his house and they accused us of stealing their belongings and a case was filed against us. But we won that also. At first, whenever the police came, the women were afraid of them. Later on we were not afraid. We became wiser and were no longer afraid. Instead of handing over the accused and the things we just destroyed the contents. So we started working earnestly to stop alcoholism. A woman from Top, from Kangla Siphai side, she stopped selling alcohol after we caught her. To enable her to start a small business, Trilokchand, a Marwari¹⁸⁹, who helped us a lot, gave her Rs. 500 which was a big amount those days. After Nishagandhi¹⁹⁰, even the drunkards respected us and said, 'Ima Namaste¹⁹¹.' They sobered up seeing us and became normal; they became gentle. Fighting and violence was reduced... When we used to stop their fights, we used to get badly bruised. We did Nishabandhi the best way we could. Once Momon was not hurt, but I was badly bruised. When I went back home, I didn't take off clothes even for a bath, afraid my family would stop me from going out again. I very much wanted to stop alcoholism as it affected children and women. We used to have a club without walls in my locality. A drunkard came and started kicking the thatch wall. The club secretary reported to the police. The man threatened the club secretary. The police went after him but couldn't catch him. The drunkard threatened saying, 'Eat your favourite food now, because I am going to kill you later. The same day, there was a drama to be held in the community and we were out for Nishabandhi. For four or five days we were on the lookout for him. When all of us were out, this man hit a woman with a hockey stick. She was injured badly. All the women and men began looking for him. We reported to the police and then all of us searched for him in all possible places, under the bed, cupboards... We wondered where he had disappeared; he had just been there. Then we found him on the roof of the house. He didn't come down, till the police pointed a gun at him and took him away. But whenever drunkards are arrested the police don't keep them in the jail. They release them when they become sober. So they are back to drinking again. There were many such cases where we caught and counselled them. Later, in many places, this Nishabandhi action caught up. In Keisamthong, Kakhulong area, there was people's action to ban selling and consumption of alcohol. There was an andolan to destroy the whole locality and fights erupted. Thus we faced a lot of hardship. In 1975 we formed All Manipur Women's Social Reformation Development Samaj in Hoareichandbi. After forming All Manipur, we started all this work I mentioned. Then around 1980, the movement—the Meira Paibi movement¹⁹²—came about.

¹⁸⁹ A person from the Marwar region of Rajasthan in India.

¹⁹⁰ Nishagandhi Dance Festival or Nishagandhi Nritya Utsav is held in the month of October and March in the city of Trivandrum. This dance festival is held in Nishagandhi Theatre, in Kanakunnu palace compound.

¹⁹¹ Hello, Ima.

¹⁹² The next phase of the women's movement as a collective force in Manipur was in the beginning of the 1980s. Manipur was declared a disturbed area, and security and para-military forces were deployed. When civilians were affected resulting in the arresting and beating, killings, disappearance of youths, raping of women, sexual

(...)

Binota: Ima, you've told us how women were in action going to different communities for Nishabandhi. You were a housewife looking after your family, how did you get fully involved in Nishabandhi and how was the Samaj formed?

Ima: As a woman I started getting involved in this kind of work. As in the community there were a lot of fights after drinking, I was concerned. I have no fear when I am working for the wellbeing of the people. When All Manipur was formed Choubi was the President Momon was the Secretary, Taruni was the Vice President and I was the Publicity Secretary. Other members were there and we formed committees. In many other places where people didn't know about Nishabandhi and the problem of alcoholism was there, they called upon us. We went there and formed committees. So Nishabandhi started in those places also. At first when we went out for Nishabandhi at night we didn't hold torches. With torch light in one hand and a stick on the other hand, we hid in bushes or roamed around. This way we went to places and formed committees. At first we didn't have an office. First we registered at Nagamapal. We got the registration number in 1977-78. After that we had our first office in a small library in a hall in Nagamapal. We were there for a while. The government destroyed the library for building a bridge. Then we were in Haobam Marak, in the house of one of the advisors. Then we shifted to Keisham Leikai; it was nearby. Many tribals and others from far away places used to come. We had no space to eat food. At night we used to spread out the banana leaves on the road and eat when there were many guests. When that was also not possible, we shifted to our President Pebam Choubi's place. This disturbed the family. The brother of one of the organisers had a small shop in Konung Mamang. It was about to be demolished; we shifted there. Around 1975 we started working seriously. From the early 80s to late 80s we went to many places for Nishabandhi. There were cases of wife-beating, throwing the food at the wife and cases of beating up children and the husband drinking while the family starved. Many people came with cases to All Manipur Women's Social Reformation Development Samaj. With our Secretary and the President leading, we worked earnestly to arrest and ban alcoholism. I told you before, how we went to Chandel and caught the people there. On December 29, 1980, some unknown person had planted a bomb in Maibam Leikai. I wouldn't have known it. That day, on a cold December morning around 3.30, it was still dark. I went cycling to Kwakeithel to our Secretary Momon's place. I had to go to some place with her. Momon was not there. She had stayed the night at the President's place. Then, I went to the President's place to call Momon. I asked them to come with me. Choubi Didi told us to go ahead as she wanted to take bath. We had tea in a hotel. There we heard, in Awang Maibam Leikai, under the Heirangoithong bridge, a bomb had been planted and that combing operation was going on there. I'd just come cycling over that bridge. Had I not come by the edge of the road I might have died. We were worried. We came back home hurriedly. The place was surrounded by army personnel. "Where are you going?" they asked, "We're going home," replied Momon Didi. Momon spoke Hindi well. There we saw many young boys, hands tied like this, lying on either side of the road, on that cold December

abuse of minor boys etc, women initiated a movement to protect the innocent persons, eventually known as "Meira Paibis" (Torch bearers) and their organization as "Meira Paibi Organization". Over time the Meira Paibis became involved in resolving family conflicts, in checking and controlling immoral traffic, and in arresting and handing over the persons who are involved in drug trafficking, etc. Today Meira Paibis are called to solve the conflicts, but they also engage in protest activity as necessary.

morning. We thought they had died in the blast, but they had been picked up by the army. There was an innocent young man in our locality, in no way connected with this. He was preparing for an interview for the SI's post. He'd gone for a morning run on the Canchipur road. After he came back, he took off his wet shoes and he was sweeping his front yard. In the combing operation, all the young men were tied and kept on the roadside and the old men were shepherded into an open ground; only the women were left at home. When the army came to the young man's home, while he was sweeping, they brought a dog. The dog sniffed and found the shoe; it took the shoe to the place where the bomb was found. They took the shoe, brought it back to his place, the smell of the shoe matched with his.

(...)

The dog held on to him like this, then the army caught, blindfolded and took him away to the camp. We could go in there but not come out. I told the General Secretary, "This boy they've taken is innocent, he had no bad name in the locality. If even he can be arrested...there were many others arrested in the locality in the same way, screaming and shouting. We thought they were guilty—they were caught, their hands tied back and hauled inside the truck as if they were sacks of rice. They are also beaten up as if it's the end; their backs will be broken—beaten up as in hell. They are caught and beaten, caught and beaten...but we were there then as part of Nishabandhi, so we couldn't speak out. The boy, Ibomcha, was arrested—that day three of them were arrested— Ibomcha was arrested on charges of planting the bomb. (...)

Since Didi knew Hindi I told her "Ichema, till today we have thought that the army arrested the youth because they were at fault. But in this incident, I know Ibomcha very well and know his innocence. So we must rescue him from the army camp. We were then working as a Nishabandhi group. Wearing old clothes as disguise I came out to mobilise the women in our locality. An army guard standing at my gate with stengun ordered me to go in. I went in and wore very old and tattered clothes. Before the combing operation started I mobilized many women in the locality. After the combing operation started many women came out. We thought we'll go to the army camp to release the boy. By then even the President who lived far away had reached the place. In order to get the boy from the army camp around 100 women gathered. The drunkards mocked at us saying, "When MLAs and ministers are unable to bring them out, what can you women do? You'd better stay with the army." They swore at us this way. We took no notice of the comments. When we decided to go to the army camp, from among 100 women, many made excuses, as they were afraid, that they had to change or go to the toilet. Around 30 to 40 of us remained. And we proceeded to the army camp at Langthabal. It was on December 29, 1980. As we approached the camp, near the hill we shouted, "Our son is innocent; give him back to us." The army personnel seeing us approaching called out "Halt." Only two of us were allowed to enter. So the General Secretary Momon and myself went in. They asked us what it was and we told them, "Our son is innocent; give him back to us." (...) The army personnel told us that they would have a meeting and that we should come after two hours. We moved away from the camp and waited. After two hours, we were called in and the boy was handed over to us. He was not able to walk properly. So we took a bicycle and made him sit on the carrier with some of us supporting him and came home. On reaching home, the boy was unable to function. We asked about how he was treated at the camp. He softly told us that water was poured through his nose till his stomach was full but he hadn't spoken—Ibomcha was married then and had a child—after

that his two feet were stretched out and were ground with a big boulder breaking some of his bones and muscles. So he was unable to walk. After that he stayed at home. Due to the bomb scare, the army came in groups to our locality. They said that some underground people might come and they were going to arrest them. So even if someone was ill, about to deliver or needed a doctor, no boy came out to call for help. We went out in the night with lanterns but as the wind was blowing, it was of little use. Then we soaked pieces of cloth in kerosene, wrapped them around wooden sticks and with that light we went to call the traditional healers for help. It was on 29th December 1980 that for the first time we took Meiras [torches] and went around so that they could differentiate between women and men and not harm us in any way. We could also see the army. So the day Ibomcha was held we took out the Meiras for the first time. The two sons of the men who had mocked us were also among those arrested by the army. One was a driver in the electricity department. Some wires were found in his house. The other was from a poor family, and the mother used to collect old metal scraps and sell them. Two used bullet shells were found among the metal scraps. So these two were first taken to the police then to the court and brought back to the police. So they came to us to release them as the family was unable to do so. We were asked to help in rescuing them. The families feared to be alone. So General Secretary Momon and Choabi stayed for four to five days with the families of the two boys. So even though those men had mocked us they came to us for help. When we went to plead for their release, we were told that one of them had planted the bomb and the other was involved in making the bomb, so they could not be released. As the spot where the bomb was planted was very close to their houses, we answered saying, "If they'd planted the bomb so close to their houses, they would surely be hurt if the bomb exploded. As they'd not even deserted their houses for safety someone else must have planted the bomb." So since we were able to give reasonable explanations, the boys were handed over to us. This was the first time that the Nishabandhi women were able to release three arrested youths. One was from the army camp, the others from the court and police. Since we had begun the Meira Paibi movement with this incident, it spread to many areas and the news of the release spread far and wide. After this we said that no one can arrest any person at random in front of us. If they arrested people without finding out whether they were guilty or not, we protested, followed the army everywhere with Meiras in our hands. The army'd walk on the side of the road while we'd go in the middle of the road with Meiras. They would ask us, "Ma, where are you all going?" We would say, "We are going for patrolling." And whenever they arrested any youth, we would try to intervene and stop them from arresting without ensuring whether he was innocent or guilty. As we started travelling to different areas, we had problems with our travelling expenses. We started selling our personal jewellery and wore artificial ones so that our family would not scold us. We sold our clothes, we even mortgaged the drinking bowls of our husbands, so when they wanted to drink water they would be missing. Anything we could lay our hands on.... Thus we travelled. The first time we held the Meiras on December 29, 1980—the day of the week we forget—so we'd taken the arrest report copy from the police so that it would remain in history. After a year we observed the day as *Pari Kanba* or *Meira Houba* (Rescuing of our sons/Rising of the Meiras) so that it will forever be remembered in history. This year it will be the twenty fourth anniversary of this day. After that many people approached All Manipur when boys were arrested. In running around to help we had no time for ourselves anymore, not even for a bath. At times the boys'd be handed over to us. Like this the Meira Paibis went to different areas and the news of our work spread. Thus we were known as the Peace Keepers of the land. We continued with our work and from the year 1964 till today we have not returned home. When we are asked we say that we try to adjust

between our home and work. Be it day or night, we try to do some work although it may not be economically useful. Due to the nature of our work we own nothing personal anymore. We have utilised our personal jewellery, clothes etc, for the group's expenses. The clothes we are wearing are also mostly given by people who know about us. We are not able to buy any personal things of our own, even this earring is given by someone.

(...)

Binota: Ima, after the formation of Nupi Samaj, what work was taken up by the Nupi Samaj.

Ima: We have done a lot of work. There was Kunjarani from Khurai, she was working in her aunt's house. The man of the house raped her and she hanged herself. When we went there she was still alive. When we were approached and went there she was still alive. She was in the hospital for a long time. She was alive for a very long time. We nabbed the man and handed him over to the police. (...) Property disputes also came to us but we only negotiated between the parties. We tried to negotiate as far as possible. We didn't know the law. We told them not to fight and to settle things peacefully. If they agreed it was fine; otherwise we told them to go to the court. There was the case of a grandmother and grandson in Toubal. The grandmother loved her grandson. But the grandson after drinking heavily, wrung the grandmother's neck thinking it was that of a chicken on a duck. The blood was splattered all over. That was a mad case; we left it as family case. The neck was wrung and flung on the floor. The grandson said he mistook it for a duck. He was so drunk. That was a mad case; we left it as a family case. Later, there was the case of a fight between a husband and wife. The wife came running to us saying she can't live there anymore. When the husband came to take her back, she refused to go saying she was afraid of him. As she refused to go we told the husband to leave. We said, "If you want your wife back, we'll take her to her parents' home. You can get their permission." So we took her to her parents at Khongjom. With the parents' consent they went back together.

Binota: Ima, you told us that you were fond of singing and dancing during your childhood. What kind of songs and dances did you like?

Ima: I participated in Sanjenba, Rasa dance, Holi Pala, Khubak Ishei. After my children grew up, I participated in Moirang Parba. I enjoyed watching Khamba Thoibi. I liked the character of Nongban.¹⁹³ I really wanted to know whether I'd be good at playing the character of Nongban at that age. I tried it out once and I got the best actor award.

Binota: In performance, which do you like more, Rasleela¹⁹⁴ or Khamba Thoibi¹⁹⁵?

¹⁹³ In the Khamba Thoibi dance, Chief Nongban is represented as the fool in the story and is a rival to Khamba. Nongban is the Chief of the Angom clan.

¹⁹⁴ The 'Raasleela' is the Cosmic Dance in which featured Krishna and the Gopis.

¹⁹⁵ There is a belief that Radha and Krishna were the original authors and creators of Manipuri dance. Uma and Shiva repeated this Rasa-dance in Lasya style in Manipur. After many centuries the same Rasa-dance was performed for the third time by two mortals, Toibi and Khamba. These star-crossed lovers died in tragic circumstances. In the 15th century AD, Khamba, a prince of the *Khumal* Royal family fell in love with Thoibi - a princess of the *Morang* clan. The union would have been politically advantageous for both families but the Moirang chief resisted on purely personal grounds. The result was tragic not only for the young lovers but also for the feuding tribes of Manipur.

Ima: As I have told you, I have played Nongban. In Nupi Pala, I have sung following the lead singer. I participated in the chorus. At times I also sang a solo piece. I couldn't memorise much but I took part. I'm not very good at singing but I've performed all through these years, whatever the trend. If my voice had been good, I'd have been famous. But I am interested in singing, so I just participated. My voice is not good. I just memorise and can sing in tune.

While performing as Nongban we have to stand up. But in Holi Pala¹⁹⁶ we can sit and sing with the cymbals.

Ima singing here

*Hey sakhi Radha,
Look how beautiful Shyam is! Come and see...
Hey sakhi Radha,
Come and see Shyam
Peacock feather on Shyam's head,
Green lotus painted on Radha's hand...
Come and see...
This is how it goes*

(...)

Binota: Ima, you have been doing social service for long. How do you manage your role in your family as a mother, as a wife etc.? How do you manage the two?

Ima: I worked day and night. I finished cooking in the morning before the children went to school and then I went outside for people's work, when they were young. I had to come back before them. This way I managed both housework and community work. After my children grew up, I started spending whole nights out for the community; I stayed in the office. It is just like an addiction. When it is necessary I just feel like going out. I want to be in gatherings, in banning alcoholism, Anything that is for the people, I want to be there. People also keep inviting me to attend meetings. Since we have our office here people do invite. I don't stay at home much. Invitations keep coming. I also like to advise the young people I've known from their childhood. Whenever the army does wrong or picks up somebody, we protest. If an innocent boy is picked up we try to stop it. Even if he is guilty we seek his release after a while. Now that I am old my children and grandchildren serve me. So I am not doing much housework. Even if I go back home I have nothing much to do. So long as I am strong and have the time I want to dedicate myself to serving the people. Till today I am serving the people. I am weak now, but I take injections for Rs. 120-130 per month for my strength. If I have pain I take tablets and go out. Till I become very sick and can't get up, I'd want to serve the people Till the end.

(...)

¹⁹⁶ *Holi Pala* is a form of dance.

Binota: The women's role in the history of Manipur is known everywhere. But what about the men of Manipur?

Ima: Be it India or elsewhere, men tend to fight with one another, resulting in killings and violence. That is why, women are out to prevent these fights and killings and to stop violence from spreading. (...)

Binota: Ima, you have told us about a young man being picked up by the army in a combing operation. We have the Armed Forces Special Powers Act¹⁹⁷ or AFSPA. How've you been working in this context?

Ima: After the AFSPA came, in April 26, 1980, in the very beginning, in Langjing there was an open firing between the army and the insurgents. During the firing, a pregnant woman called Bino who was hiding in the rice store room was killed. While the people were still angry with the killing, the very next day, in the Khwairamband market, a woman selling gold jewellery was carelessly shot by the army with their guns walking inside the market. Women's problem... Many such cases were there. A month later, on 28th May, was a mass agitation. We weren't Meira Paibi but Nishabandhi then. When the women surrounded the army, they got scared. They picked up the people in jeeps and drove them away to distant places. Pyari, a young woman from Keinou fell down from the jeep in Salanthong and died. From then on we started an andolan to repeal the Special Powers Act. We went to the Chief Minister and fought with the army. They drove us to far off places in their jeep and we returned the next day. We struggled in this way. There are also many rape cases by the army. (...) When such rape cases occur and we identify the CRPF culprits from a particular camp they only say enquiry will be done but no action is taken. Rape incidents increase. Pramo from Keirenphabi was raped. Then there was Ahanjaobi from Takyel Khongpal. She was raped before her sick child lying on the bed. They say only in this case the culprits got punished. Take the case of Sanjita from Jiri who was raped while bringing lunch for her father in the field. She came home crying, took poison and committed suicide. Manipuri women are raped by the outsiders, by the CRPF, army, by Manipur Rifle... by Assam Rifles not Manipur Rifle.... They have no respect for the women of Manipur. Though we agitate there is no action from the Government. If the Government took up some action, they would have been afraid but there is no action. Not only this; there are so many rape cases that we go to nooks and corners holding the Meira, holding the torch to maintain peace in Manipur so that there is no violence. We don't allow men to come out as they are caught and killed. If we insist, the men would surely come out. Today the number of men is reducing because they are being killed every day. We have more women and we may end up with no men. The army sent by the Government to Manipur to protect us, which is their job, instead of protecting us, they are raping the women. (...)

¹⁹⁷ The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act of 1958 (AFSPA) was passed by the Indian Parliament. Under this Act, all security forces were given unrestricted power to carry out their operations, once an area was declared "disturbed." Thus, the AFSPA gave the armed forces wide powers to shoot, arrest and search, all in the name of "aiding civil power." It was first applied to the North Eastern states of Assam and Manipur and was amended in 1972 to extend to all the seven states in the north-eastern region of India.

Binota: Ima, please tell us about the agitation by the women in front of the Kangla, in connection with the Manorama rape case¹⁹⁸.

Ima: There were many cases before Manorama. We've been suffering silently and keeping it inside us. It was boiling inside our heart for long. When we heard Manorama was arrested, it was July 11, 2004. She was arrested on 10 July at night and was found dead on 11th July early morning. The arrest memo had her own signature and still she was found dead the next morning. When we heard about it, people from all directions gathered at her place without any mobilisation and an association called Apunba Lup¹⁹⁹ was also formed. People were angry and dissatisfied. When we returned from the meeting, we were boiling inside. It was at our previous office that our President Taruni,²⁰⁰ myself and others discussed that it was useless continuing like this, we should do something—just take off our clothes. Not many women were there. It's a private meeting. Our President Taruni and myself thought and discussed about it. 50-60 of us were there. Next morning we started from different directions. We were sly as otherwise, the army'd stop us. We planned that small groups would start gathering from all directions. We gave signals with our eyes. That time we felt we were quite a large number, we just went there. And that day, in front of the Kangla²⁰¹ we women effortlessly poured out all that was pent up within us. It burst out from within us in front of the Kangla and spread all over Manipur. Whatever was boiling within us for so long burst out that day. We didn't know what we were doing. Even I was unconscious about what I was doing. We were crying and shouting totally overwhelmed. What was suppressed for a long time burst out. We don't know what we did in the Manorama incident. (...)

Binota: Which other women organisations are you working with?

Ima: We have been working with all the other organisations. There's Chingmee Tamme, then ours, Macha Leima, Ipko-Nipko and many others, we all get together and work in tandem. (...)

Binota: Ima, we have in Manipur, killings and abductions not just by the army, other groups are also indulging in such acts. What is your opinion?

Ima: It's not just the army. The Manipur Government being in such a state, our children are also killing one another. Instead of doing anything for the welfare of the people the government is letting different communities fight with one another with their divide and rule politics. Killings are happening not only between different groups but within the same community also, both in the valley and the hills. It is not just the army. If the government can negotiate and if it can do some productive work and open some factory to give employment to the youth and not let the youth idle away, then I feel it will make the situation better. Now we have killings everywhere, there is only killing and killing. (...) They felt that with guns, with killing, they can bring out the truth, bring peace, but you can't bring truth nor peace with guns and by killing. If they kill my children

¹⁹⁸ The rape and killing of Manorama Devi allegedly by the Assam Rifles personnel sparked widespread protests in Manipur against the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA).

¹⁹⁹ A group of 32 civil society organizations based in Manipur formed a coalition called the *Apunba Lup* to protest abuses under the AFSPA.

²⁰⁰ President of Nupi Samaj.

²⁰¹ Kangla Palace; traditional seat of past governors of Manipur; occupied by the British till 1947, then the Assam Rifles (a paramilitary Indian group) till 1992; then turned over to state government.

can I be quiet? Now, with children being killed, everyone is fighting with one another, there is hatred in everybody. The government is in a position to bring peace. They should hold talks with the insurgent groups, understand what their demand is. But our State is at fault, for we no work, no productivity. We are bringing in cheap clothes from outside. We have no yarn here, so when a woman works day and night and produces a piece of cloth, her profit is only Rs. 10. She cannot buy even one kilo of rice with it. We cannot live in this condition. (...)

We are not able to live in this place, we have no peace here, but still as the saying goes, like “walking with a stick on a slippery road”, we, the mothers, to set things right, holding our life in one hand, with pain and our chaddar in the other hand, are coming out. Not bothering about food, we are there in the front. But the rich aren’t coming out in the open —only the poor mothers, illiterate and struggling for their livelihood and who are concerned about their children fighting. We are now in a condition where we will become subservient to others.

Binota: Ima, you have been working for the society for many years. You have also gone outside Manipur, to Delhi etc. to meet the Prime Minister and the President. What has been your experience?

Ima: We went to Delhi to meet the Prime Minister. We met Indira Gandhi for prohibition of alcohol; we submitted a memorandum to her. She gave us a form to fill up in which we were asked why we worked as Nishabandhi. We wrote that in our families, our sons and husbands drank neglecting the family. Instead of feeding the family, they rob the family to drink. Manipur was going to ruins because of alcohol, so we asked Indira Gandhi for prohibition in Manipur. During the time of Rajiv Gandhi²⁰², a drug addict killed a boy called Momocha while snatching his earring. So we went to request for banning of drugs, as we were afraid Manipur will be in ruins due to drugs. When we told him that we have no fare for going back to Manipur, he helped us with Rs. 13, 500. With that we came back home. Then, after the death of Rajiv Gandhi, we went there often. We submitted memorandum to Sonia Gandhi²⁰³ to repeal the Special Powers Act. Then, there was the bald one, what was his name, Rao²⁰⁴... Every year we go to request for repealing the Special Powers Act. (...) Every year we go to Jaipur, Andhra Pradesh, Meerut etc. for prohibition meetings when invited. When Momon, Choubi and Indumani were there—were young then—we went to different places along with them—to Delhi, Kolkata. Guwahati, Mumbai. In Mumbai we used to have a branch of the All Manipur Social Reformation Development Samaj. Since we don’t go there now, it has been forgotten. In this way, whatever problems we have in Manipur—problem of killing, alcohol, drug addiction etc,—since they come under the central government we went to Rajiv Gandhi and other Prime Ministers to submit memorandum every year. We have longstanding problems and they don’t seem to be ending. We want peace before we die, but I think death will come before it.

*Heirangkhoini is the fruit we eat,
No other fruit tastes better in the mouth*

²⁰² Former Prime Minister; assassinated in 1991.

²⁰³ Italian wife of Rajiv Gandhi, who therefore did not succeed him as Prime Minister, though she did become the head of the Congress Party.

²⁰⁴ After Rajiv Gandhi’s assassination, P.V. Narasimha Rao was chosen to lead the Congress Party. He was invited to head a subsequent minority government and did so for five years.

*Lotus floweres are blooming in the neighbourhood
And male bees are following.
Come, come my dear, let's go,
There are many jealous people
Walk ahead of me...*

Let us finish here; I am tired.

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS:
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: INDIA

**Transcript of Mahasweta Devi
Interviewer: Anjum Katyal**

Location: Kolkata, West Bengal, India

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Mahasweta Devi, born in 1926, is one of India's foremost writers. Her trenchant, powerful fiction has won her recognition in the form of the Sahitya Akademi (1979), Jnanpith (1996) and Ramon Magasaysay (1996) awards, amongst several other literary honours. She was also awarded the Padmasree in 1986, for her activist work among the dispossessed tribal communities. In 1980 she started editing a Bengali quarterly, *Bortika*, which she turned into a forum where marginalized people who had no voice elsewhere, could write about their lives and problems.

Anjum Katyal (the interviewer) is the editor of the theatre journal *Seagull Theatre Quarterly* brought out by the Seagull Foundation for the Arts, which has also published the entire works of Mahasweta Devi in English translation. She is also trained in Western music and performs regularly on stage.

Mahasweta Devi Transcript

Anjum Katyal: Mahaswetadi when one sees you now, you look like a very gentle and kind grandmotherly type. We all know you are very well established in the field of letters and of activism. What were you like as a little girl? I am talking about before adolescence. What are your memories of your childhood?

Mahasweta Devi: Childhood was extremely happy. My family was very different and I was the first child. I was a girl. I was greatly welcomed by everyone. In our days, it was a very extended family. I mean, mother's aunts and father's aunts, things like that, and uncles, their uncles, my own uncles and aunts, this was there. But basically you see, my father and mother never stopped me from doing anything I liked... I learned to read very early. Before four, I was a fluent reader. (...)

Anjum Katyal: Where were you living at that time?

Mahasweta Devi: So many places because father was a government servant. He was being transferred from this place to that place. I think the happiest days were passed at Medinipur town. In those days, Medinipur was a small town. The officer's quarters were at the end of the town. You walk a little from my house, then you enter into big Sal forests²⁰⁵ with Santhal²⁰⁶ huts and villages. So plenty of freedom — whatever you want to read, you could read. No one would stop us. Father was a great collector of... he was very enthusiastic about music, paintings, sculptures. So I was introduced to these things at very early age. (...)

Anjum Katyal: Mahaswetadi, you were saying that in your family, you had a lot of freedom. No one ever stopped you from anything. Also that as a girl you were very welcome, even though you were the first-born and you were a girl. Do you think that this had something to do with the fact that yours was a highly unusual family culturally, politically?

Mahasweta Devi: Generally, on mother's side, education was greatly encouraged and I have seen people, mane — I mean, my maternal grandmother. Their mothers-in-law from that time you know education, library, newspaper reading all these things were encouraged. Also, our ancestral village, at least on my mother's side, was very patriotic. There was one Rajen Lahiri who worked with Bhagat Singh²⁰⁷ and on Kakori conspiracy case,²⁰⁸ he was hanged. Then Mohit Moitro,

²⁰⁵ Sal Forest is a forest type dominated by a single plant species, commonly known as Sal tree (*Shorea robusta*). Sal forests are mainly distributed in the South and Southeast Asia, occurring along the base of Tropical Himalayas from Assam to Punjab, in the eastern districts of Central India, and on the Western Bengal Hills.

²⁰⁶ Domed and thatched mud huts.

²⁰⁷ Bhagat Singh: A freedom fighter from Punjab, North India, who became famous for his involvement in the Kakori conspiracy and was later hanged to death.

²⁰⁸ Kakori Conspiracy Case: On August 9, 1925, during the national freedom movement, a few freedom fighters from Uttar Pradesh (North India) carried out a robbery on a Kakori bound train on the Lucknow Saharanpur railway line. This came to be known as the Kakori conspiracy.

another cousin of my mother, he died in Andaman jails²⁰⁹ because they were on hunger strike. They tried to force feed them, you know, pushing tubes inside their stomach. He died because of that. That day, I remember especially, it was 1937. I was in class seven. I had come to Medinipur from Shantiniketan²¹⁰. But mother was still, but not speaking very much. Father was also very... I understood something has happened. Then I asked 'Who'. This I could guess that someone has died. My mother pushed the newspaper towards me. Then I read. (...)

Anjum Katyal: The earlier childhood up to the age of ten, there was a point in which you were saying that the house that you remember most clearly was in Medinipur and it was right on the edge of the forest and the tribal settlements²¹¹ were there. So was that then your first introduction to a culture that was different from yours, the tribals?

Mahasweta Devi: Yes. You might...yes, you might link those days with my later interest but later interest was you know — then I jumped fully into it. At that time, what we found you know, that the Santhals, generally people were not very friendly to them. Santhals are not de-notified²¹² tribes. Actually they are more sophisticated and very advanced — all the tribals are. Somehow, they would have to... police would slap cases on them and then they would have to go and report at the police station every evening. It was very difficult for them. And they worked on day-wage in the government quarters this house, that house. That also police insisted. If they worked there, they could keep better watch over them. Then my father asked them — two boys — father would ask them and they said, "We have to do it." Father went to the police station and said, "They work at my house. I refuse to allow them to come to the police station to report. Whatever report you want, you can take it from me. Come to my office and I will give it to you. And those boys will go home. Their home is quite far away in the jungles. So they were, you know, very close to us. And there was a boy. They would... he would clear some leaves and make whistle-like things and all of us very lustily would blow at it. They always encouraged me, patting my back. Yes "Hobe²¹³" you will be able to do it. Medinipur was just fantastic. From childhood, father purchased a cycle for me so I would cycle anywhere. One day, cycling, cycling, in the meadow behind our house, there was a quite big — you know... what shall we call it. We call it in Bengali *pukoor*.

Anjum Katyal: Pond.

²⁰⁹ Freedom fighters involved in resistance to British rule were sent to Andaman jails or the "Kala Pani" with long sentences. Several died due to inhuman treatment and torture.

²¹⁰ Shantiniketan is a famous university town in West Bengal.

²¹¹ Adivasis, or literally "original inhabitants," or tribal peoples comprise a substantial indigenous minority of the population of India. Tribal peoples are particularly numerous in the Indian states of Orissa, Bihar, Jharkhand, and in extreme northeastern states such as Mizoram. Officially recognized by the Indian government as "Scheduled Tribes" in the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution of India, they are often grouped together with scheduled castes in the category "Scheduled Castes and Tribes," which is eligible for certain affirmative action measures.

²¹² Denotified tribes are the tribes that were originally listed under the Criminal Tribes Act in 1871, as "addicted to the systematic commission of non-bailable offences." Once a tribe became "notified" as criminal, all its members were required to register with the local magistrate, failing which they would be charged with a crime under the Indian Penal Code. The Criminal Tribes Act of 1952 repealed the notification, i.e. 'de-notified' - the tribal communities. This act, was however replaced by a series of Habitual Offenders Acts, that asked police to investigate a suspect's criminal tendencies and whether his occupation is "conducive to settled way of life." The denotified tribes were reclassified as habitual offenders in 1959.

²¹³ Bengali for "it will happen" or "you can do it."

Mahasweta Devi: There was quite a big pond and it was far away so people would not come there generally. With the cycle, I fell into it and somehow I knew swimming so I came up (...) But mother said yes, she loves cycling, she fell and she knows swimming, she can come. She was never perturbed by anything, always encouraged.

Anjum Katyal: So you think that as a child you had as much freedom as a boy in the family would have had?

Mahasweta Devi: Yes, yes, fully.

Anjum Katyal: Physically to run and play outdoors.

Mahasweta Devi: Yes, yes, If a cycle was purchased for my brother, who was younger than me, one had to be purchased for me as well because father himself would do it, “She loves cycling, she enjoys it, let her do it.” Things like that, which is very good. And in the family also we have seen great grandmothers and grandmothers. My grandmother, maternal grandmother, she had her own library. And what is remarkable, they were in Dhaka²¹⁴. Definitely in those days, it was a moffusi town. There my father was known as a Shodeshi (Swadeshi²¹⁵) okil, (lawyer) that means the vakil (lawyer) who fought the cases of the Swadeshi — these people. So there was not much money but my maternal grandmother had a fantastic library and in the evening, my grandfather’s friends would come. People who fought such cases, who published magazines and she talked very competently with them. They would come to take guidance from grandma. Because grandma read so much, knew so much, and often she wrote on women’s issues. Jayshree was a very patriotic magazine published by the then Leela Nag and Renu Sen who became later Leela Rai and then they became, you know, they are known as Forward Block People²¹⁶. Anyway, they were very patriotic. Their magazine Jayshree... often these two would be arrested and who is to run the magazine? It would come to our house and grandma, my mother, my aunt all of them would write and sell those magazines here and there. This I — we have seen, so much — we have seen them do, I have seen so much my mother do. So whatever I do now, it’s only natural. Had I not done it, it would be very unusual and rather betraying them. Because she always... the entire ambience was very different. During puja²¹⁷ time in our East Bengal village, big boats, on the big boats, they took, you know, saris and things for people to purchase. And they would take books. During puja time, the entire village, the women would purchase books. Sarat Chandra and

²¹⁴ Dhaka is the capital and largest city of Bangladesh.

²¹⁵ The Swadeshi movement, part of the Indian independence movement, was a successful economic strategy to remove the British Empire from power and improve economic conditions in India through following principles of *swadeshi* (self-sufficiency). Strategies of the swadeshi movement involved boycotting British products and the revival of domestic-made products and production techniques. Swadeshi, as a strategy, was a key focus of Mahatma Gandhi who described it as the soul of *Swaraj* (self rule).

²¹⁶ Forward Bloc is a political party set up by Subhas Chandra Bose. He formed the party in 1939 as a radical faction within the framework of the Congress. He declared that the object behind the formation of the new party was 'to rally all radical and anti-imperialist progressive elements in the country on the basis of a minimum program representing the greatest common measure of agreement among radicals of all shades of opinion'. He, however, hoped that all radicals such as socialists, communists and Kisan Sabhais would respond to his call.

²¹⁷ Puja is the act of showing reverence to a god, a spirit, or another aspect of the divine through invocations, prayers, songs, and rituals.

other writers. Their books would go to the villages, remote villages. They purchased books. It was quite common, everyone would read books.

Anjum Katyal: What about some of the magazines? Like you just mentioned *Jayshree*...

Mahasweta Devi: Basumati was a very popular magazine where Mr. Thomas did all the paintings you know. His wife... and those were very popular. But Probashi was the magazine edited by Ramanand Chatterjee which was very unusual, published Tagore, published other things. On women's issues, Probashi was very, very strong. Any woman passing the secondary examination or becoming a graduate would be big news for Probashi. Women writers also wrote there. Sita Devi, Shanta Devi and other writers. They also wrote a lot. Then there was Bichitra. Bichitra was very, very... more on pure literature. But Bichitra is the magazine for which Bibhuti Bhushan Bannerjee wrote *Pather Panchali*. So since all of them were immersed in...all these books would come, we would read. *Parichay* — edited by Shudin Dutta. My father was also was a writer for *Parichay*. I remember one year in Shantiniketan — in Calcutta - father is not writing anything. And the editor Shudin Dutta is hammering him. Then Shudin Dutta told my mother, "You have to write something." So mother wrote a story. She wrote a story. And she wrote very well. She wrote especially on women's issues.

Anjum Katyal: So that was published in *Parichay*?

Mahasweta Devi: Yes, *Parichay*.

Anjum Katyal: So did she write often?

Mahasweta Devi: She wrote, but because father would promise...give some promise to three magazines and would not write anything, she had to write. She was forced to write. Wrote poems, wrote stories. That I become a writer was, you know... my mother felt very fulfilled; father also felt very fulfilled. (...)

Anjum Katyal: So Mahaswetadi, you said that around the age of ten, you were sent off to Shantiniketan.

Mahasweta Devi: Yes.

Anjum Katyal: And that you were in the beginning very, very upset by this.

Mahasweta Devi: Very upset.

Anjum Katyal: Being sent away. But then you changed your mind after...

Mahasweta Devi: When I reached Shantiniketan — going to Shantiniketan with father was quite an experience, because that was December and from Howrah²¹⁸ we travelled by train. Then father suddenly remembered sometime, long back, I wanted to have another ice-cream which he

²¹⁸ Howrah is an industrial city on the left bank of river Hooghly and is Calcutta's twin city. Howrah is also West Bengal's second largest city. The two cities are linked by the famous Howrah Bridge (Rabindra Setu).

never allowed. And in those days, Calcutta was fantastic. He went there and purchased four ice-creams for me. Those were, you know — in those days they would go with those and Stop Me and Buy One. One *anna* in one those days, *anna, pais, rupiahs*²¹⁹. That one *anna* was painted on the Stop Me and Buy One, *Happy Boy* ice cream. He bought four. I stared at it, because I was shedding tears like this (looks down). It was very shameful to cry before your parents, I felt. I ate all the four ice creams. Then I went to sleep. In the morning, I...we reached Shantiniketan; he took me to Stree Bhavan, the girls' hostel. And the superintendent came out and said, "Oh, this small girl. Her name is such a big one. Mahasweta? Which other name she has? I said Khukoo. And from that time, I became Khukoo for Shantiniketan. And very soon, you know, I was so absolutely immersed in Shantiniketan. Everything was very new to me. (...)

Anjum Katyal: Can you tell us something about studying in Shantiniketan in those years? What was it like?

Mahasweta Devi: Just three years ago, I wrote a book — *Amader Shantiniketan*. In that, many of the memories, I have brought back. First thing was '36, '37, '38, I was in Shantiniketa. That's five to seven. Tagore²²⁰ was alive. And Shantiniketan was a small place. We could always go to Tagore without any... there was no, you know, no one saying not to come, things like that. Tagore's granddaughter, I mean Rathi Thakur's adopted daughter, Nandini... her nickname was Poope. Poope was also in the school, and after school hours whenever...

[Phone rings]

Mahasweta Devi: ... we found time, we went to *Uttarayan*²²¹. That means Tagore's house. Tagore's daughter-in-law was a very affectionate, kind and saintly person. She would give us plenty to eat, to go to play around and things like that. (...) Plenty liberty there, plenty going out in the scorching sun... when rains came, we would run through the gravely, absolutely ocean wavy-like reddish-reddish from *khoai*²²². We would run to Kopai river, they would push us into the river and ask us to swim. They would be with us. They would save us all right. That's how I learned to swim. Being thrown into river, turbulent rivers and then fighting with it. Shantiniketan was fantastic. And then Tagore's dance dramas, very famous — thus *Chitrangada*, *Shyama*, *Tasher Desh*, *Chandalika*²²³. When the rehearsals went on in the evenings where Tagore would sit for two or three hours without moving an inch and whenever he found, you know, something is wrong with the song or dancing he would just lift his finger and silently everyone would leave

²¹⁹ Currency.

²²⁰ Tagore is considered the greatest writer in modern Indian literature, Bengali poet, novelist, educator, and an early advocate of Independence for India. Tagore won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. Two years later he was awarded a knighthood, but he surrendered it in 1919 as a protest against the Massacre of Amritsar, where British troops killed some 400 Indian demonstrators.

²²¹ Uttarayan (known as Makar Sakranti in other parts of India) is the day when the sun starts to travel northwards marking the decline of winter. The days become longer, the skies clearer and the breeze cooler. Although, Uttarayan is predominantly a Hindu festival marking the awakening of the gods from their deep slumber, history has it that India developed a rich tradition of kite flying due to the patronage of the Kings and Nawabs who found the sport both entertaining and a way of displaying their prowess.

²²² *Khoai*: The *khoai* in Shantiniketan is the term for the open area bordering the Vishwabharati land in and around Shantiniketan. It is reddish in colour because the earth there is reddish. It is softly undulating, sparsely vegetated land, like a huge open ground.

²²³ Plays written by Tagore.

the room. (...) Happy, happy days Anjum, very happy days. So, in a way, without telling us anything, sense of duty, sense of all the time working, keep busy, find something fruitful to do. These were...

Anjum: Values

Mahasweta Devi: ...values of course. (...)

Anjum Katyal: Now let's talk about your writing — start with the first story — or the first piece that you wrote.

Mahasweta Devi: Well, after Shantiniketan, I came to Calcutta. I was admitted to class eight, 1939 it was. That same year, our English teacher, she was very good. Also plenty personality, who talked to us students much. Her elder brother used to edit a very good children's journal.

Anjum Katyal: What were their names ?

Mahasweta Devi: *Rang Mashal* it was named. And the leading poets and writers of that time they wrote for that magazine. I was — because father always made me subscriber to all the magazines, children's magazines, this, that — so...avid reader of *Rang Mashal*. Then Aparnadi comes and gives me one copy of Tagore's, his childhood memories...

Anjum: *Chelebala*

Mahasweta Devi: *Amar Chelebala. Chelebalair ami beshi*. And then she asked me to write a review on that. I was horrified, I said, 'Review...', because review... I have read in class lessons and things like that. But who has heard of review, no one writing review and Tagore also ... But Aparnadi was very different. "I think I will get it within so many days. So you go and write it." I hadn't told my parents. That was printed then. Then I was even more horrified because I felt it was no good and ultimately they came to know — that was a first piece of writing. But when I went to Shantiniketan again for my B.A. courses — Sagormai Ghosh, *Desh* weekly, he edited. His house is also in Shantiniketan. He went many times and I was quite — supposed, to be a good student of Bengali. He asked me to write. I wrote a few pieces. But now I have forgotten about what or what was there but two three pieces came out in *Desh* and all the friends in the girls' hostel were electrified when a money order for 10 rupees came to Stree Bhavan. So all of us...

Anjum Katyal: So when did you start feeling that you were a writer?

Mahasweta Devi: I did not feel that way because I was — my husband²²⁴ wouldn't have jobs, son was small. So many jobs I tried my hands at, like the time I wanted to try to export monkeys to America, nah?

Anjum Katyal: I don't know about this.

²²⁴ Her husband, Bijon Bhattacharya, was a playwright-actor-director in Bengali theatre and is considered one of the architects of the people's theatre movement.

Mahasweta Devi: You don't know? This is a very good story. Because in those days, communist families were persecuted a lot. My husband was not trying but everywhere such families were economically made to feel the crunch. We have been punished, you might say, for belonging to the communist ideals. Was it communist ideals? That also I do not know. Anyway, that was happening. One of my husband's friends came and told me, "Madam, would you like to export 15,000 monkeys to America?" Just like this. We live in Shan Bazaar and it's daytime after cooking and eating bhat²²⁵ and dal²²⁶, he expects me to export 15,000 monkeys. It sounded very unreal. So I said, 'Of course I will do it.' I had no idea how things... Then I heard that in America, they make experiments on monkeys for medicines. That it should not be done, that idea, at that time, I had not gone to. I was not very old, so... He took me to New Market. Just behind New Market, there was this big patti (stretch) where these animal sellers were there. A bearded and very dignified-looking Muslim told us, "What? 15,000 monkeys?" He has to submit a tender and the equation was that me and Sadhon Babu will get one paise²²⁷ eight for fifteen thousand paisas. Sixty-four paisas made a rupee. So it was fantastic. We would get something. I said, 'Where from you will get monkeys?' He said, "Why, from Madhya Pradesh²²⁸." Everything was so easy to him; so all those monkeys, he caught them, by train he sent them. From Bombay station, they put them in a ship and the American people would have to arrange for that. But then, what happened we do not know. Then my Mama²²⁹, Sachin Chandhuri, comes — who edited *Economic and Political Weekly*. He says, 'You see these Bengalis are so bad.' I said, "What happened bodo (elder) Mama?" He said, "Some madcaps in Calcutta, I hear there was a woman behind it." He doesn't suspect that it is his niece. So they were here and all those monkeys came and American ships they were stopped at the ports for something... so all those monkeys in

Bombay station were in a crate and there are big demonstrations by Jains²³⁰ and other people. These monkeys will die of starvation. I think one or two died. Starvation, starvation — Bombay people were horrified. British time. No — after independence. So...they were fed all right. Ultimately, Bombay authorities had to take them to the Western ghats²³¹ and unleash them. And till date when I travel there anywhere in the remote corners of Maharashtra, whenever we come across a monkey, Lakshman Gaikwad or Ganesh Devi tells me "Ma, here is your... descendants of your monkeys." So that ended there.

Anjum Katyal: What was your first real story that came out which was, you know, which you considered to be your creative writing or your first piece as a writer.

Mahasweta Devi: You see, ...writing came very easy to me, and in trying to solve my eternal economic problem there was a very good readable weekly, *Sachitra Bharat*. My uncle's friend, Jishu Sengupta was connected with it. He told me, 'Can't you write small sketches for it?' At

²²⁵ Rice.

²²⁶ Lentils.

²²⁷ Currency.

²²⁸ Central Indian state.

²²⁹ Mother's brother.

²³⁰ Jainism is a religion and philosophy originating in the prehistory of South Asia. Followers of Jainism are referred to as Jains.

²³¹ The Western Ghats comprise the mountain range that runs along the western coast of India, from the Vindhya-Satpura ranges in the north to the southern tip.

that time, I was working for Central Government²³² — for two years I worked, then I was sacked by them for marrying a communist but before that I would write but I couldn't use my name. I would take on the pen name of Sumitra Devi and talked about — a person who talked incessantly. That means I gave this name *Anabarato* — *Anabarato* means continuous. Very light reading but readers enjoyed it. But I was rather toying with it. And then we went to Bombay, Bijon²³³ had to write some story, for K. A. Abbas²³⁴ — it didn't materialise. So ultimately we left Bombay after one year when he wrote his film story on *Nagin*²³⁵. *Nagin's* story was horrible but it was a super hit of those times. This one year I utilised because I was in bodo (elder) Mama's house (Anjum: Sachin Chaudhuri) and with his card, I would go to Asiatic Society, sit and read and then come back. (...)

Anjum Katyal: So how did your interest in the *Rani of Jhansi*²³⁶ come about?

Mahasweta Devi: No, just because I read the story. And then, this rang, you know, old some where, some where — yes I have read about her in childhood, in my grandma's library, in other books, other book reference to her. Rabindranath's elder brother referred to her all the time. Only that day, the Rani of Jhansi, she has proved her courage and resilience and things like that. Anyway, I read that book, I decided to write a biography. I had no — I had not come through the discipline of history or anything or research. I did not see my future — that my whole life I will go on researching into strange subjects. I came back and I came across the name of the Rani's nephew who was still living. Actually, when the Rani of Jhansi was married, she was eight years old. Her father also came with her and settled in Jhansi. And Rani of Jhansi's husband Gangadhar Rao — was about 30-32. Her father was also 30-32. So after coming here after her marriage, father also married another 8-year old girl²³⁷. And this stepmother and the Rani, they were you know, close childhood friends, things like that. So Rani's son, adopted son, different Damodar Rao, but her nephew Naveen Chintamani Pandey, I came across him, he was a member of the — one of the History Congress members. So that year, History Congress took place in

²³² The Government of India, officially referred to as the Union Government, and commonly as Central Government, was established by the Constitution of India, and is the governing authority of a federal union of 28 states and 7 union territories, collectively called Republic of India. The legal system as applicable to the federal and individual state governments is based on the English Common and Statutory Law. There are two levels of government; Central and State.

²³³ Her husband.

²³⁴ A journalist and film critic.

²³⁵ A successful horror film released in 1976. *Nagin* (The Female Snake) follows the bloody revenge of a female ichhadari (shape shifting) snake against a group of people who kill her mate.

²³⁶ Lakshmbai, also known as the Rani of Jhansi. She died in 1858 fighting the British in what was the last major action in the Great Indian Rebellion which had started the year before. Today her name is commonplace throughout India, renowned as a leader of the Rebellion, but she was more than a martial leader. In her brief time she cast aside many conventions to unite peoples of all castes and religions in her cause. She put aside purdah, which she only observed with respect to the British, encouraged other women to do the same, and trained them to fight and support the main army; Lakshmbai was not the only Jhansi woman to die fighting the British. She cut across the social norms of the time, refusing to accept her fate 'as a woman.'

²³⁷ Child marriage is practiced in some parts of India. It is worth noting that marriage and consummation of marriage may be separated by many years.

Ahmedabad²³⁸. (...) Then I had this mad idea, these days, people say this is the subaltern point. I did know anything about subaltern. Actually, when I first came across the word, I thought it is British time *ka* word. Subaltern Subedar hota hai na? (Subedar was a Subaltern isn't it?) I went to Jhansi, Gwalior, Kalpi [and] nearby places to collect as much as I can from the people's source. It was fantastic memories. Now. Sitting in the winter-time — it was December again, winter-time sitting in open meadow with all those woodcutters and others. We were sitting around a fire and they are singing songs. I can't remember just now, but it is written somewhere...

Anjum Katyal: Songs about the Rani of Jhansi?

Mahasweta Devi: *Hanh,
pathar, mithi se fauj banai Kaath se kator
Pahad uthake ghoda banai
Chali Gwalior*

(She made soldiers out of soil,
A sword out of wood;
She picked up mountains and made horses,
And off she rode to Gwalior)

(...)

Anjum Katyal: And that was your first book.

Mahasweta Devi: Yes, it was serialised for a weekly *Desh*; then it came out as a book. I was instantly known as a writer. Don't think there was no resistance. Plenty resistance.

Anjum Katyal: Of what kind?

Mahasweta Devi: 'It is nothing, just romanticism, no truth in it.' Things like that. So many things I have forgotten, people, generally, I will not name them but established Bengali writers, you see, 'Her entry is through the back door with her father's influence.' How, I did not know. So, I had to listen to all these things. They made it a point, so I listened to them. There was one situation where direct confrontation with someone. He said, "I will see how you write, you will not be able to write." Then I was much younger then, Anjum. I told him, "But you will see I will survive by writing. I will live on writing alone. I will become a professional writer." They laughed. (...)

Anjum Katyal: So do you now, when you think back, are there any particular kinds of writing or things that you prefer that influenced you. Like you know, you prefer a certain kind of style maybe, or certain kind of subject or is there something that you feel influenced you?

²³⁸ Ahmedabad is the largest city in the state of Gujarat and the 7th largest city in India, with a population of more than 5.2 million (52 lakh) people.

Mahasweta Devi: That I have always acknowledged na? That 16th century poet Kabikankon Chondi, the writer, Mukundaram Chakraborty, he... he has been known as — big scholars like Sukumar Sen and others consider him the first Bengali novelist because his ballads on the hunters and the banias (traders /merchants)... That was very much renaissance time — that 16th century because all those Hindu gods and goddesses, they were their — traditional gods and goddesses, but the villagers who worshipped them is a people who sea-traded. They had to wor (worship), someone who would protect them from storms and things like that. Snakebite — so the snake goddess Monsha had to be. All these gods and goddesses — village deities lok vritta — the lok dev...devis came to be worshipped. That was a time when Brahminism²³⁹ could not, you know, what shall I say, could not spread to all villages. In their daily, everyday life, they don't worship Durga²⁴⁰, or Lakshmi²⁴¹ or things like that. It's more like Monsha, like Bhasuli, like Sheetala like these gods and goddesses who are well-known household names who protect children, who do this, who do that, things like that. That was it...And historically, all over India, in England or Europe — liberal humanism renaissance, they call it. But in our country also, like Chaitanya, who declared that you need not go to a temple, you need not go to a mosque, sit in your house and worship the god and that's puja. Like Mirabai, Nana Tukaram, Kabir — that was the time, you know, these rigidities were going, people's point of view were taking place in religion and it was a movement — one kind of movement. Casteism was not too strong with the Vaishnavas²⁴² and these people. That period fascinated me. Also this writer, Mukundaram Chakraborty — everywhere I have acknowledged my debt to him. Fantastic, you know, Bengali writing. How he observed the people's lives. (...)

Anjum Katyal: Mahaswetadi, why don't you tell us about how you first began to visit the tribal areas and what prompted you to do it?

Mahasweta Devi: An insertion in Sunday's *Statesman*. I came across this mention of this place Mckluskiegunge where one can go. I wrote a letter, then went there. Mckluskiegunge was at that time — Colonel Mckluskiegunge at some time was the Anglo Indian MP (Member of Parliament). Then for retired railway people — all over India, many Anglo Indians were employed, so they, originally the place name was Lapra. Lapra village or Mouja under which there were so many villages. They purchased land there. Each house with, you know, acres of

²³⁹ Brahminism: Hinduism characterized by magical and ritualistic practices performed by an elite priesthood.

²⁴⁰ Durga is the incarnation of Devi or the Mother Goddess, a unified symbol of all divine forces. She manifested when evil forces threatened the existence of the Gods. To destroy these demons, all gods offered their radiance to her creation and each formed a part of Durga's body.

²⁴¹ Goddess Lakshmi means Good Luck to Hindus. The word 'Lakshmi' is derived from the Sanskrit word *Laksya*, meaning 'aim' or 'goal', and she is the goddess of wealth and prosperity, both material and spiritual. Lakshmi is the household goddess of most Hindu families, and a favorite of women. Although she is worshipped daily, the festive month of October is Lakshmi's special month. Lakshmi Puja is celebrated on the full moon night of Kojagari Purnima.

²⁴² Vaishnavism is one of the principal divisions of Hinduism. Its adherents worship Vishnu as the supreme God or one of his avatars and are principally monotheistic whilst also incorporating elements which could be described as panentheistic in nature. Bhaktas, or worshipers of Vishnu are called Vaishnavites, an English term that originated from *Vaishnava* in Sanskrit, which is the Vriddhi form of *Vishnu*). The Hare Krishna movement is a modern example of a Vaishnavite organisation. Vaishnavas believe that Vishnu-Narayana is the one supreme God (Parabrahman) and all other gods and creatures are subservient to Him. Shri Vaishnavas are numerous in all South Indian states, with Tamil Nadu having the main concentration. There are several million adherents in all. The community includes many brahmins, who are the leaders of the Shri Vaishnavas.

land like 15 acres, 18 acres, 21 acres, fruit garden, bungalows, cultivation ground. With their money, they settled there and their children, then they migrated to Australia, Canada, these places. They started renting out the houses. Anyway Mckluskiegunge was a very big place, very quiet and the best thing was after alighting from the bus, bus from Ranchi, bus from Dhanbad, you have to walk. In Mckluskiegunge there was no place for any conveyance or anything — we walked. I enjoyed it a lot. With the Anglo Indians, I became very friendly.

Anjum Katyal: Which year was this?

Mahasweta Devi: It was I think 1963 — 63 or '62. While we were moving around, I would leave after breakfast, walking, walking, end somewhere, plenty tribal huts. And all the hills and rivers were connected with so many legends you know. There was a legendary tiger which would come from the Neundra Hills and go into one of the abandoned bungalows, sleep there and then go back. (...) But the tribal people I found fantastic. They came under... there were some tribals who had been converted and were Christians — they lived separate but all of them were together because they were forest workers and did the same thing, not many households where they could work, they worked some... Delightful people. You remember my story *Hunt* — Mary I found there.

Anjum Katyal: Mary Oraon?

Mahasweta Devi: Mary Oraon, Mary Oraon

Anjum Katyal: She was the child of an Anglo Indian and a tribal.

Mahasweta Devi: Haah (yes).

Mahasweta Devi: Very fair skinned and she would not go to school. She would graze cows and buffaloes and very competent also.

Anjum Katyal: And she was a real person.

Mahasweta Devi: Real person. So many persons there in the stories are real persons. (...)

Anjum Katyal: So Mahaswetadi, you discovered the tribals when you went to Mckluskiegunge but how did you get so pulled into their life and how did they become — their cause become — so important?

Mahasweta Devi: You see, that way I have been to many places because you will find my writings like Dhoulis and others — on people who are not tribals also, but poor village people. I would go anywhere, you know. I had this madness in me. I would walk to their houses, be very well received. Sit with them, talk. Often sleep in their houses, then come. I just like, loved it. But at that time, I was not thinking of writing anything on them. You might say I went to learn from them, not to teach them anything. Because I found them absolutely scientific, absolutely sophisticated, behaviour and everything, very much.

Anjum Katyal: Can you give an example of what you mean? Because most people's idea of tribals is the exact opposite. So when you say scientific and sophisticated, what do you mean?

Mahasweta Devi: Very good, you see. Most of the tribals wouldn't use oils and things. They would you know, slow roasting over slow fires, steady, ongoing ground fire. That's very scientific. And I remember once eating venison — fantastic. It was in the morning, and Mckluskiegunge was a place where many kinds of bamboos grew. Natural bamboo forests, not the bamboos planted for, you know, economy, as we see elsewhere. Big, hollow, this bamboo, they chop the meat, put it there — first with adrak, mirchi, namak, lasun²⁴³, everything and seal both ends and put it in the slow fire, very slow fire and we left for the day. We went out here, there, here, there and then when we came back, meat was absolutely cooked, it was delicious. I have not eaten anything like it in my life. So you understand, how sophistication, civilization and true rules of what needed doing. I remember one child was burnt. His grandfather ran, chopped off the head of a fowl and poured the blood all over. He said this blood is also alive and it will cover the burn and very soon, new skin will grow. There should be scientific explanation for it. But actually, the child, when I saw her later, she was all right.

Anjum Katyal: No scars.

Mahasweta Devi: No scars. Nothing. And houses were immaculately clean. You could eat from the floor. Cleanliness was one of the prime conditions which everyone abided by and so keen to learn from everything. This I have seen in other tribes also like Vanshavar. They said, 'Why do you use glasses? Why do you have to have a lantern or a torchlight? Just learn to see, penetrate into the darkness and see because the stars also give light.' With such people I have walked in the evenings, never missing my...

Anjum Katyal: So Mahaswetadi, over the years, you have done many different kinds of things. You have been a supplier of monkeys as you were telling us. You have also been a sales person, school teacher, roving reporter for *Jugantar*. So can you tell us a bit about these different phases and also the kind of writing that was linked to them in different times. (...)

Mahasweta Devi: You see, as I told you, I was always over-energetic. In our days women just did not do so many things. But when I was in Ashutosh College studying intermediate, me and my friends, went and started block-printing saris. We started a job, regular. There was one Gujarati boy who would do it for us. It was in Bhawanipur. I have forgotten the name, was not very successful and also you couldn't invest much. Before that I was so enthusiastic, I wrote a letter, seeing an advertisement, to Dhaka. I still remember Dhaka, Urdu Road. They sent us a few packets of wash-soaps for dyeing clothes. Different colours, very lurid and gaudy colours they were — orange, blue, green, things like that. Chop into pieces, boil it, dump cloth, let it boil for so many times, then you take it up, wash with cold water. That way, I ruined many of my mother's, you know, bed sheets, this, that, curtains, even one of my saris. So after that I thought it's better if I sell it to my student, I mean, my colleagues. Because I was in a college, so, I used to purchase it, in those days taka, anna, paise — three annas per piece. And I sold it to them for

²⁴³ Ginger, chili, salt, garlic.

six annas per piece. But all the girls were enthusiastic. They purchased those soaps. And one day father came to know and I didn't dare, you know, writing my own name, so I wrote Kadambini Devi. Atrocious, very old time name. One day, the peon has entered the house and he is hollering, "Where is Kadambini Devi, Kadambini Devi?" Father is horrified. 'No Kadambini Devi lives here.' I said, "No, it's come for me." So when the transaction was finished, father said, "You were doing this thing all these days — means purchasing, having soaps brought from Dhaka this, that, this, that — this is not good. So, that was something, very bad, that experience also. But I had saved something like thirty rupees. And that 15th April, Bengali New Year's Day, I presented Rabindra Sangeet²⁴⁴ records to my parents, storybooks for my brothers and sisters and things like that. But that was adventure. After my marriage, we were really in a fix. I was married in '47. Then I tried so many things you know, clothes dying powders because I, Bhawanipur area we lived — all the Sikhs²⁴⁵ told us, "Why don't you get us this dyeing powders because we" — they were dyeing their turbans. So I will purchase from Bada Bazaar and sell it to them. They are very nice customers, they would give me lassi²⁴⁶ and make me sit, take some rest, talk with them and if it was a lucky day I would eat some sarson ka saag²⁴⁷ with roti²⁴⁸ and this. So that phase also passed. My son was born in '48. After that, came the monkey-supplying business. Then, I joined this Central Government office from which I was thrown out for my husband being a communist, so it was all right. (...) I had to do something. So, that time, after that came the writing of *Rani of Jhansi*. And then, *Rani of Jhansi* was serious writing. But other writings, I was doing. Woh (those) stories, then light stories for *Sachitra Bharat*, this-that, this-that was going on. Then for one year, I joined a local school, Ramesh Mitra School for girls as an English teacher. Though I am very bad in English, I had English Honours in B.A. So that was done. But that was just a leave vacancy. After one year, I was sacked.

Anjum Katyal: Did you get any money for these light stories that you were writing?

Mahasweta Devi: Yes, yes, that was the only incentive. Fantastic in those days I used to get fifteen rupees per story from *Sachitra Bharat*. And fifteen rupees was oodles of money because you could purchase so many things. And I still remember from the first advance I received for, not *Jhansir Rani*, the next book, *Noti*, with that, I got four hundred rupees — I sat on the floor and wept; I never knew there is so much money in the world and with that I purchased bed clothes, curtains, this that, this that. Those were happy days.

Anjum Katyal: And what about working with *Jugantar* as a reporter?

²⁴⁴ Rabindra Sangeet refers to the 2000 odd songs (about 2230) and poetry written and composed by Bengali Nobel-laureate poet Rabindranath Tagore. These songs are regarded as cultural treasures of Bengal in both West Bengal (India) and Bangladesh, formerly East Bengal. The Rabindra Sangeets, which deal with varied themes are immensely popular with speakers of the language and form a foundation for the Bengali ethos that is comparable to, perhaps even greater than, that which Shakespeare had on the English-speaking world.

²⁴⁵ Sikh—considered a subset of the Hindus, followers of the spiritual leader, Guru Nanak.

²⁴⁶ Lassi is a traditional South Asian beverage, originally from Punjab, India/Pakistan, made by blending yogurt with water, salt, and spices until frothy. Lassis are enjoyed chilled as a hot-weather refreshment. Traditional lassi is salty and sometimes flavored with ground roasted cumin.

²⁴⁷ A leafy vegetable dish with mustard green (sarson) and spinach.

²⁴⁸ An Indian flat bread.

Mahasweta Devi: That came later because I was in... by '63 I had passed M.A. private and I got this job with at Bijoya Roy Jyotish College as an English... lecturer in English. By that time, I was quite established as a writer. (...) *Do Ana Khoi Mala* was written by that time. *Rongta* was written by that time. Short stories I had written plenty. And I remember I was also interested in crime. I wrote crime stories as well. (...) But by that time I had become immersed with local tribal life interest and I was going about searching for local eet bhatas — brick kilns — and immigrant labourers brought from Bihar — their exploitation... So when *Jugantar* offered me, I started writing occasionally. They said, 'No Mahasweta, you have to write regularly.' So just like that, I took leave from the office. I got — only that day I have given it to my editor Ajay — *Jugantar* issued me a visiting card that she is being appointed as a roving reporter for *Jugantar* with my photo and all. And then I was, by that time I had left my second husband. So I was absolutely free. So every morning, early morning, by the early morning train, I would go to the village and write. With that, I was creatively writing, I was doing this roving reporter things, but because of my close connection with village, village life, also writing about them — people — my life was, you know, widening like anything. (...)

Anjum Katyal: Mahaswetadi, let's talk about *Bortika*. The journal that you have been bringing out for so many years. It was started by your father as a literary journal and then you changed it. So can you talk about that?

Mahasweta Devi: My father was... he was an eminent writer of those days. The... and he was very close to the young people. They requested him to take it over. They had, I think brought out one number. Then on behalf of a local club, this became their magazine, father started editing it and encouraged many writers who later became well-known like Syed Mustaba Siraz, like Phulakentu Babu, Phulakentu Singh and Abul Bashar — all of them have written for this magazine. He died in '79. Unluckily, I was not there at that time. I had just come to know, that I have been given, awarded the Sahitya Akademi prize²⁴⁹. And the day I left for Berhampore, that day he had died. So I went there with my other sisters after, you know, after cremation, everything — I had to be there, it is my good — somehow - luck to cremate my people.²⁵⁰ The brothers, father, everyone. So anyway, after that I came to know that publisher of that magazine — a local man — a very good man. He was weeping, 'Dada, you are going. *Bortika* would stop.' He told him, "*Bortika* will not stop. Ask her to continue it." So that was a command to me. And I started, but the first number²⁵¹ we published — yesterday I showed them the very first number — to keep the continuity. The next number was very important — on my father — and I declared in the first number that I would change the orientation. Only villagers, or such people who never write their life stories — the novelists do, they will write their life stories and experiences — so it will come straight from the grassroots. No literacy means nothing to me. Class four onwards, whatever be their literacy, anyone who can write Bengali, will write for my magazine. And then I started, you know, with increasing popularity in the villages. There was a time when I had 800 subscribers from the tribal belt of Medinipur alone. Then it increased to 1,600 or 1,900, because increasingly, they started writing their life stories. And their name and everything has come out in print. That gave them a great, very big jolt. And I used to receive so many village subscribers. And then I started to, you know, make the writing more focussed — are you an agricultural

²⁴⁹ National award from India's academy of letters.

²⁵⁰ Death practices include cremation; cremation is associated with good luck.

²⁵¹ Devi means the first issue.

labourer, then these are the points you should pursue. If you are a village school primary teacher, these are the points. Are you a rickshaw puller in a small town? ... So many categories are there. And plus, that not only village, rural Bengal started being documented, then I, the very first, one number was on tribal women, women but village tribal women, village Muslim women, like that.

Anjum Katyal: Writing their own stories?

Mahasweta Devi: Writing their own stories. (...) Do you remember about Chuni Kotal²⁵², that Lodha²⁵³ girl, who had to commit suicide?

Anjum Katyal: She was the first woman of her tribe who got a B.A.

Mahasweta Devi: Chuni Kotal was like a daughter to me. She would come to me all the time to Calcutta. Then she joined in Medinipur, that tribal girls, hostel and she was also a student of the Medinipur University. Vidyasagar University it is called. Chuni wrote her life story. She told me 'No *didi*, I can't do it! I said, "You can do it!" I said, "You can do it, you have to do it." Chuni wrote her life story for the first and last time for *Bortika*. And after her death, everyone has borrowed from it. And whatever they have written, is based on *Bortika*. But Lodhas — you know, hunger for literacy was more in them. So, Lodhas on them, written by them, their life stories — school children writing poems and prose pieces, those numbers I have brought out Five numbers on the Lodhas alone, on the Santhals too, about the Munda tribals one, then others also. Then closed down factories, then life of cycle rickshaw pullers — on so many subjects. (...)

Anjum Katyal: For *Bortika* was there any other particular incident you can remember where, maybe certain kind of information came into the journal from women, which helped with their lives.

Mahasweta Devi: (...) Yes, Yes. My mother was a source of such stories, because she befriended — she was very nice and very severe also, very strict, with all the village women who after Bengal partition²⁵⁴ came to work. She would take them. My mother was remarkable. She would take the local — the Harijan²⁵⁵ children — who are not allowed in the tea shops. She was a short person and she went there. And her pallu (sari end) would be under her armpit, because it would slip, because she was, that way not very... So she would go to school and say, "These boys, I have come to admit these boys and girls." That was never done before in Berhampur. Caste-dominated, these people were untouchables, because for Municipality, they were, you know,

²⁵² Chuni Kotal was a Dalit Adivasi graduate student of anthropology at Vidyasagar University in West Bengal, India. As a result of continuous racist discrimination and insults from her upper caste Brahmin professors and university administrators, she committed suicide in 1991. Her death became the focal point of immense political and social controversy in the media in West Bengal, and eastern India, where the discourse is traditionally Brahmin-Baniya dominated.

²⁵³ A tribal group in West Bengal.

²⁵⁴ Partition—the partition of India into India and Pakistan, which was the fallout of independence from the British on August 15, 1947, the repercussions of which continue to manifest itself today in Hindu-Muslim violence; Pakistan celebrates independence day on August 14, and India, on August 15.

²⁵⁵ Harijan was the polite form for *untouchable* coined by Mahatma Gandhi which means "Children of God" The term can also be attributed to Dalit castes of Pakistan called the "haris", who are a group of mud-hut builders. Many Dalits consider "Harijan" condescending, or otherwise feel obliged to discard the term 'Hari' - a Hindu divine name - in preference to the term 'Dalit.'

they carried shit on their heads. In those days, those were non-sanitary latrines. They said, “How to admit them?” Ma (Mother) said, “Government has started these schools, government pays you. Have they told you not to admit them? I am getting them admitted. I am the wife of the local income tax officer and I want to know. After seven days I will enquire and I will sort it myself. And I ask my husband to take the magistrate and visit the town and see what happens. Because husband and wife never cared for government jobs and they went, thus they were. And the horror of it was all of them, Jugal and others, their ma (mother) would come to — daierma²⁵⁶ we would call them. She would come to clean our latrine. She would come with her four children. So it was our duty to give them bath, to feed them, then to make them sleep in time. For daierma there would be clothes — clean clothes, separate set of soap. So she would go and take bath, wash her clothes. Then in fresh, dry clothes, she would sit and have a big meal. And in the afternoon, after everything, when the sun went down, she would go home. So, she is the person, she said, “Ma, you have done so much.” Ma said, “I want also something from you.” “What?” “I want to take your children to school.” From that it started. And such a caste-ridden society, you know, everyone said ma is supposedly a Brahmin’s wife. She never cared. And after years Jugal passed matriculation, he became the Municipal Workers’ Union’s secretary. She (he) came to my mother and told “Granny, granny, we want to make her, bodo mashi (elder aunt) to be our president.” I said, “No, Ma, don’t tell them, ‘yes’, because I live in Calcutta, I come to see you and father, I cannot do it.” Ma said, “No, Khukoo, you have to do this.” Her words were supreme. By that time, she had gone blind and bas ho gaya (that was it) — I became President of the Berhampore Harijan Workers’ Union and as such demonstrated on the streets, went and fought the Municipality authorities, things like that. So many things happened. In my lifetime, I could never....

Anjum Katyal: If anybody tries to write a novel about your life, it will be worse...

Mahasweta Devi: It will be very difficult.

Anjum Katyal: ...worse than magic realism.

Mahasweta Devi: Yes, what did I not do?

(...)

Anjum Katyal: Mahaswetadi, in most of the stories that you have written, the characters, or the locations or the subject is about the most marginalized and dispossessed segments of our society, the most, the people who are leading the most suffering kinds of lives. And within that, there is also a strong collection of women’s stories, women’s issues, women characters. Now, how do you feel about this all? Because some people do think that you write more about women. Do you agree with that and how do you feel about the whole thing?

Mahasweta Devi: (...) I try to write about the entire class. Class-wise they are exploited. Men, women, children, all. Women’s issues are marginalized. Women suffer more because they have a body. But also, women suffering peculiarly, it’s continuing for thousands of years. It starts from

²⁵⁶ Maid servant.

home, it starts outside, when she is an adolescent, when she is just growing up. Do you not read in the newspapers? A seven-year child is gang raped. Girls. Only yesterday I read that a girl-child was born and she was a new-born child, was left on the roads of Howrah, things like that. It's a continuous process. (...) You remember the story *Chinta*? *Chinta* had to pay such a price. She had to sell both her daughters. She had to pay such a price because she had after being widowed, she lived with another man. That's why. These things happen even in their society. Man goes and marries another girl, brings her home, nothing. In their society also. Their society is also very, very cruel against women. About the tribals, I will not say so. Tribal society is entirely different. Girl child is very welcome. No difference between a boy and a girl. The entire attitude is different, why different — it must be something which has been going on for thousands of years — they are carrying it in, they are carrying it in themselves. And this had to be written, that's why, I wrote. And also I have seen such women. (...)

Anjum Katyal: Mahaswetadi, can you tell us about your experiences with some of these very spirited personalities like Manda, for example, that you have written about.

Mahasweta Devi: Manda Hiramanchanda that was the name later given by her admirers, admiring women. (...) Manda belonged to Kolhati tribe. About Kolhati tribe you should read this book, written by Kishore Shantabai Kale. She (He) has written about his mother who belonged to the Kolhati tribe. Also, he is the first person who has written about these eunuchs — very good writing. Belongs to the denotified tribe. So Manda was a girl, very spirited, very beautiful and as per custom in their society, the eldest girl was never married, but she was auctioned off. The highest bidder would take her, '*Chera Utarna*' (*Chuda Utarna*) — break the bangles — which means have sexual relations with her. So the first person who broke the glass bangles would give the father something like twenty thousand rupees — how much — as much as they could give. Her father, her brothers — they would live on her earning and after some days then she would again be auctioned off to another — the highest bidder. Manda was seething because she was, twice she did it and third time she got hold of a very long whip and she said yes, and this is done very ceremonially — the panchayat²⁵⁷ — sarpanch²⁵⁸ would be there, others would be there, the bidders also. So she said, who is the bidder? All the men were there. Also, her mother and others and Manda, as the bidder advanced to take her, draw her by hand, she brought out her whip and lashed at them, all of them, cut their skin, they were bleeding and howling. Manda just ran away. She went out and ran all the way — on the cycle, motorcycle — she knew how to... arrived, went to the centre where Lakshman Gaikwad, Maharashtra's undisputed leader of the denotified tribals... Gaikwad is a good writer also. His book, *Uchalya*, or *The Branded* got the Akademi prize²⁵⁹. So Lakshman's organisation gave her shelter. Then Lakshman Gaikwad came and came to [the village] and this village was seething, "What she has done? She cannot be forgiven. Let her come. If we can catch hold of her, we will, you know, peel her skin from her body and do

²⁵⁷Panchayat refers to a council of elected members that makes decisions on issues key to a village's social, cultural and economic life: thus, a panchayat is a village's body of elected representatives. The council leader is named *sarpanch* (in Hindi), and each member is a panch. The panchayat acts as a conduit between the local government and the people.

²⁵⁸ A sarpanch is the head of the village in India. The sarpanch is the focal point of contact between government officers and the village. It is an elected position. Recently there have been proposals to give sarpanches small judicial powers under Panchayati Raj.

²⁵⁹ The Sangeet Natak Akademi Award is given by the Sangeet Natak Akademi - India's apex body for performing arts. It is the highest national recognition given to practicing artistes.

this and that, burn her alive in the acid.” Things like that. Lakshman came, Lakshman is a very great personality, very dominant, booming voice and everyone listened to him. He had hundreds of followers and everywhere — for making the denotified tribals aware everywhere, he had karyakarta, area workers. So came there and said, “He who touches this person, I will skin him alive, I am Lakshman Gaikwad. And how much money did you take?” he asked the father. Manda said this much — first time this much. ‘Give me the money.’ He took that money and told everyone — ‘Anyone tries to harm her, *panch ka koi meeting hua, kuch hua, tum dekhoge* (five-member jury if you have any meeting, just see). And she becomes the local karyakarta, you have to listen to her. And with that money, he went to the heart of Jamkheda and there Kolhati women who do this — their music and dance, this profession — this is their profession. They have to earn that way and give it to her malik, (owner) for the time being. So there...double-storeyed wooden structure — Manda lived upstairs, I went to that house. Downstairs is their stage. In Maharashtra, this is traditional Tamasha theatre and Manda’s whip was hanging there. The idea was that you come, purchase the tickets, see dance, listen to songs, see our dramas. Anyone trying to touch the girls, flay him. And she was given a Bullet, Bullet brand motorcycle and her famous whip, with that Manda, in salwar kameez²⁶⁰, goes everywhere.

Anjum Katyal: Mahaswetadi, listening to you talk, very often, what comes up is that you seem to be very comfortable with people’s approach towards religion, but at the same time, I know in many of your stories, you have really critiqued the way religion has exploited people in society. So what is your position on religion? I mean how do you feel about it?

Mahasweta Devi: When, you see something, people... religion — I personally do not worship. But the maid who works for me, she does. That is all right because religion is something... in village life — there’s nothing else. It’s very important because in the old days there would be all over India, around religion, around such sabhas (gathering), there would be such melas (fair), people would come, get some solace. And very important was, from memory they would recite all old traditional [songs]. It’s very interesting, all over India in every state, in segments — especially where tribals are, this *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* has different versions. The vili version has come out. My good friend Bhagwanbhai has written it. This is due to Ganesh Devi’s... It is fantastic. The Shantanu, father of Bhishma, he was originally a maindak, a frog and he was going — cows trampled him — things like that. So all the stories were narrated there, it was in a way an institution for learning, and narrating and things like this. So what is so bad about religion? Because in a village they are narrating Mahabharata in the old style. But ask these Kolhati tribes, their version of Mahabharata will be different, living in the same village, extremely interesting source of traditional knowledge, oral tradition. Oral tradition I respect very much. (...)

Anjum Katyal: Mahaswetadi, you have often said that you feel that a writer has a duty almost to document her own time and to document the history that she’s part of.

Mahasweta Devi: That’s what I believe.

Anjum Katyal: And so, can you talk a little bit about that?

²⁶⁰ Salwar kameez is the traditional dress worn by various peoples of South Asia. *Salwar* are loose trousers and the *kameez* is a long shirt.

Mahasweta Devi: Documenting my time and my history and I increasingly find that my history, when I say my history it becomes actually the very old, very permanent on-flowing history. Yes, I believe in that. (...)

Anjum Katyal: And do you feel that there is a conscious difference between when you are writing your fiction, the way you write, the way your mind works or your concentration or whatever and the way you write your prose pieces for newspapers or....

Mahasweta Devi: Absolutely different.

Anjum Katyal: In what way?

Mahasweta Devi: Absolutely different because when I am writing something creative, that is something else because in my mind I mull and mull over the subject, you know, it becomes very widespread. Then I narrow it down. It becomes like a hard nut — you can touch it. Then that, from that the story is born and it slowly expands.

Anjum Katyal: You had said once that you wrote *Mother of 1084* in one night.

Mahasweta Devi: *Hanh, 1084*, was written over two and a half days. *Breast Giver* — *Breast Giver* was written in one night, *Draupadi* was written in one night. (...) Anjum, I can't explain myself, I don't understand. I wrote so many pages, writing, writing, writing — at one time, there was frozen shoulder, and the doctor said, "You have to treat yourself more gently, you know. You can't punish your body like this." But if I didn't write, I would die. One felt so suffocated.

Anjum Katyal: Mahaswetadi, what is your relationship with the whole idea of feminism? I have heard you on the subject before. So do you consider yourself a feminist, do you like to be called a feminist?

Mahasweta Devi: Might I answer it like this? You see, in my lifetime, I have not read Marx, Lenin or Mao Tse Tung — anyone. But from my writing, people bring out Mao, this is on the lines of Lenin and Marx. I have never read it. So if from my writings feminism oozes out, I can't do — I have nothing to do with it. But consciously I have told you time and again, that I write about the entire society. About women, of course women, men, children, all of them but about women, about such women about whom no one writes. A Dhoul, a Mary Oraon, a Draupadi, who writes? *A Breast Giver, Chinta*. They are everywhere around the, around us, but we do not.... If, the question of feminism, more than feminism, what you know these days I can't attend any seminar on it because for years they have been fighting, women are abused. There are so many acts, so that women can get redress. But it's just not within their grasp. They cannot go. Where are they to go and make complaints when no thana (police station) ever will report a woman's complaint, things like that? And, so many cases of abuses. When I say women, I don't mean tribals alone. I don't leave the middle class and upper class alone — though abusement goes [on] there also. These days, where are the feminists? These days in the advertisements, women are again being shown as, their sole existence is "*Chula chaki-bartan-vartan*." There she is limited. She may be a doctor, or belonging to corporate sector or anything but ultimately

cooking vegetable *khana* for the entire family, she has to be a *bahu* or a that type of life-giving mother. And all the suffering women are shown forty years of age. We know forty is nothing. At forty, we might say, life is beginning. So, that is that. I believe in legal redress, I believe in bearing social responsibility. All the women who are holding seminars and things, I might go and ask them, I should I think, that what do you actually... “Have you ever tried to help any woman really in distress?” (...) What is reaching whom? After that comes feminism. What is feminism? In literature, feminism. This and that — I don’t know anything about it. I don’t know anything about the theories. Whatever I want to, I feel like, I write. There it ends there it begins and there it ends. It’s for the readers to judge it. (...)

Anjum Katyal: Mahaswetadi, in the... around the time of the Nationalist Movement, there was a strong beginning of a women’s movement also. Women coming out of the home and taking part in the struggle. And again in the ’80s, there was resurgence of activism and with a lot of people coming forward and you know, pushing towards a strong women’s movement all over the country. Do you feel — How do you connect yourself to this tradition of struggle for women?

Mahasweta Devi: (...) During the national freedom struggle for independence, long before that, women have been participants and they encouraged such travels, they came out, they broke all barriers and came out. One remembers clearly the Bengal Partition — in which Tagore and everyone, when Curzon²⁶¹ wanted to partition Bengal. Not only women came out, all the so-called ‘sex-workers’ — we call them today, might call them prostitutes, they are not ashamed of the word prostitute — all of them came out, supported, did so much that it was very, very encouraging. On Calcutta’s streets they are coming out and giving their money. They are burning those clothes brought from England, things like that. So that was participation. (...) So when there was not any woman’s struggle, women’s participation? There was all the time... and during Swadeshi Movement, during *Armoury Raid case*²⁶², the poor people, they also... And how many of those terrorists — call them terrorists, call them... in those days they called them *Swadeshi* warriors. Many were housed at these poor people’s houses. The women took care of them. It’s a continuous street. That’s not the first time in 1980, women specially did not join any women’s struggle. 1980 — by that time I had become completely immersed in tribal work, fighting for them, injustice against denotified tribals known as criminal tribes. And I had my writing to do — other movements were here and there. I try to support it as much as I can. (...) If I can do something positively, that’s all right for me. For women, I have been trying for a safe shelter home. For all women in distress, they would be housed and with their children and then with NGO participation, government and non-government organisations supporting them. (...) Whatever I have been connected with, though it was not specially women’s movements, I think were, I have been connected with and I prefer to be... that is, of my own choice, people’s resistance. (...) *Bortika*’s first issue is this. *Bortika* believes that the real India lies in the agriculture and forest-based *Gram Bharat*, village India. About the village and villagers’ life. *Bortika* means writings... *Bortika* believes that the fittest writer would be the village people because their life is a ceaseless battle against hunger and exploitation. (...)

²⁶¹ George Nathaniel Curzon, 1st Marquess Curzon of Kedleston, a British Conservative statesman who served as Viceroy of India.

²⁶² Chittagong armoury raid was an attempt to raid the armoury of police and auxiliary forces from the Chittagong armoury in Bangladesh, then a part of undivided British India, by revolutionary freedom fighters led by Surya Sen.

Reads from Shanichari

[Mahasweta Devi reads in Bengali from her story *Shanichari*]

When Shanichari was a girl of twelve, she went to the *haat* (market) in Tohri. And why not? After all, they enjoyed the train ride to Tohri, sitting on the floor of the compartment, chugging along, having a good time picking the lice from each other's hair. Shanichari had gone with her grandmother, her *eng-ajji* (grandmother). *Eng-ajji* (grandmother) knew all sorts of age-old tales and stories. She didn't often find a willing audience. The old woman could hardly hear but she loved telling stories.

After they got on the train, Shanichari settled her grandmother with her back against a wall. She said 'Thakuma, tell us that story about the foolish son-in-law. It'll pass the time.'

'That one? All right.'

'Go on, start.'

'The foolish son-in-law was on his way to his in-laws'. He walked and walked and walked. Suddenly — who's following him? Must be another man going the same way. Didn't realise it was his shadow. So the stupid man offered the shadow a pithey (sweet) and said, "Here, eat this." Shanichari collapsed with laughter at this point. What a fool! Offering food to his own shadow! But *eng-ajji* (grandmother) never managed to finish a story. She would fall asleep half-way.

Reads from Draupadi

[Mahasweta Devi reads in Bengali from her story *Draupadi*]

Draupadi stands before him, naked. Thigh pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds.

What is this? He is about to bark.

Draupadi comes closer. Stands with hand on her hip, laughs and says, "The object of your search, Dopdi Mejhen. You asked them to make me up, don't you want to see how they made me?"

Where are her clothes?

Won't put them on, sir. Tearing them.

Draupadi's black body come closer. Draupadi shakes with an indomitable laughter that *Senanayak*²⁶³ simply cannot understand. Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing. Draupadi wipes blood on her palm and says in a voice that is terrifying, sky splitting, and sharp as her ululation, What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?

She looks around and chooses the front of *Senanayak's* white shirt to spit a bloody gob at and says, there isn't a man here that I should be ashamed of. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, kounter²⁶⁴ me — come on, kounter me —?

Draupadi pushes *Senanayak* with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time *Senanayak* is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid.

²⁶³ *Senanayak*: police officer.

²⁶⁴ *Kounter*: police encounters that are sometimes planned to eliminate some political prisoners.

Writing: Reads from Breast Giver

[Mahasweta Devi reads in Bengali from her story *Breast Giver*]

Again injection and sleepy numbness. Pain, tremendous pain, the cancer is spreading at the expense of the human host. Gradually Jashoda's left breast bursts and becomes like the crater of a volcano. The smell of putrefaction makes approach difficult. Finally one night, Jashoda understood that her feet and hands were getting cold. She understood that death was coming. Jashoda couldn't open her eyes, but understood that some people were looking at her hand. A needle pricked her arm. Painful breathing inside. Has to be. Who is looking? Are these her own people? The people whom she suckled because she carried them, or those she suckled for a living? Jashoda thought, after all, she had suckled the world, could she then die alone? The doctor who sees her every day, the person who will cover her face with a sheet, will put her in a cart, will lower her at the burning ghat (crematorium), the untouchable who will put her in the furnace are all her milk-sons. One must become Jashoda if one suckles the world. One has to die friendless, with no one left to put a bit of water in the mouth. Yet someone was supposed to be there at the end. Who was it? It was who? Who was it?

Reads from Behind the Bodice

[Mahasweta Devi reads in Bengali from her story *Behind the Bodice*]

Gangor breathes hard. Says in a voice ragged with anger, Don't you hear? Constantly playing it, singing it, setting boys on me ... behind the bodice...the bodice ... choli ke piche... choli ke piche...²⁶⁵ No Gangor...You are a bastard too sir...you took photoks [photos] of my chest, eh? OK... I'll show...but I'll take everything from your pocket. In the silhouette cast by the hurricane lantern two shadows act violently. Gangor takes off her choli²⁶⁶ and throws it at Upin. Look, look; look, straw — chaff, rags — look what's there. No breasts. Two dry scars, wrinkled skin, quite flat. The two raging volcanic craters spew liquid lava at Upin — gang rape ...biting and tearing gang rape ...police ...a court case ...again a gang rape in the lockup ...Upin comes out, Gangor is still screaming, talking, kicking the corrugated tin walls with abandon. Upin runs. There is no non-issue behind the bodice, there is a rape of the people behind it, Upin would have known if he had wanted to, could have known.

Reads from Giribala

[Mahasweta Devi reads in Bengali from her story *Giribala*]

Giribala's house is at Kandimohokumartal Sonagram. No one understood that Giri had a mind and life of her own. Our Giri was neither a beauty nor ugly, had two lively eyes, one would notice her because of those eyes. In their community even now the girl has to be given a pon (bride-price) — exactly char kuri taka (eighty rupees) and a heifer — these many things were

²⁶⁵ What's under the bodice?

²⁶⁶ Bodice.

given to Giri's father. Then he (bridegroom) got married to her (Giri). I will not lie, her father too gave his daughter four bhoris (760gms) silver....

Singing

Mahasweta Devi sings a song in Bengali

“Since death is so near, why are you being divided and fighting it.

This will lead you to death.

My golden Bengal has turned into a cemetery,

Come let us walk together.

A Hindu and a Muslim,

All of them are lying there, they cannot harvest the new paddy.

From door to door they are crying

Mother give a little rice water.”

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS:
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: INDIA

**Transcript of Jarjum Ete
Interviewer: C.S. Lakshmi**

**Location: Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh, India
Date: 29-30 November, 2005
Language of Interview: English**



SPARROW

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Jarjum Ete is currently the Chairperson of the Arunachal Pradesh²⁶⁷ State Commission on Women. She belongs to the Galo tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. The tribe practices child marriage, polygamy and is basically a patriarchal tribe where women are not equal nor do they have inheritance and other rights.

Jarjum Ete got married when she was just seventeen and completed her studies after marriage. Her husband Tomi Ete is at present a chief engineer with the government. In 1985 she joined the Arunachal Pradesh Women's Welfare Society and became an active volunteer and later rose to be its spokesperson. The APWWS has taken up many issues like women's participation in panchayats²⁶⁸, customary laws²⁶⁹, need for a state women's commission and anti-liquor laws. Jarjum herself has very strong views on legalisation of prostitution.

She was one of the participants to the Beijing Conference²⁷⁰ and has also visited Pakistan and other countries.

C.S. Lakshmi (the interviewer) is a researcher in Women's Studies and a Tamil writer who writes under the pseudonym Ambai. She is currently the Director of SPARROW (Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women).

²⁶⁷ Arunachal Pradesh is a state of India in the Northeast of India. Itanagar is the capital of the state.

²⁶⁸ Institutions of local self-government in India; district councils.

²⁶⁹ Laws that are based in custom or usage that is ancient, well-established and has force; in India, customary laws, which, for example prohibit daughters' inheritance, take precedence over Constitutional law in tribal areas.

²⁷⁰ Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, China in 1995.

Jarjum Ete Transcript

C S Lakshmi: Jarjum, we will begin with your name

Jarjum Ete: Okay

C S Lakshmi: And tell us how you got such an interesting name and what does it mean?

Jarjum Ete: My name is a combination of two syllables, of course, Jar and Jum. Jar is actually this last syllable of my father's name and in our tribe, the Galos, we have this way of naming children, which starts with the last syllable of the father's name and, of course, another syllable for the child. So the second part of my name Jum actually comes from *Ojum* which is *darling* and they say my father had more than a dozen brothers but no sisters. So he actually was very keen to have his own daughter. And he had of course adopted lots of cousins, cousin sisters for his own...and... and when he got married he was looking forward to having a daughter. And unfortunately the first three were all sons. And then I think, he told my mother that I want to marry another woman. Because it seems like my own mother you would not be bearing me any daughter. And so my mother was also...she tells us that a...so she also told the father *ke*, "*Thik hai*" (that "It's okay") like, you know, if the fourth child is not a daughter, then maybe you can get married. So probably my mother was also looking...you know...forward to having a daughter. So that you know the father does not bring another woman (laughs) and, of course, father was dying to have his own daughter. So probably that's how they gave me the name "the darling"

C S Lakshmi: Darling of the father.

Jarjum Ete: Both. I think I saved my mother's marriage as well. (laughs)

C S Lakshmi: If your father wanted a girl so much, does it mean that in your tribe there is no son preference?

Jarjum Ete: Our tribe actually is patriarchal and patrilineal group of people. So there is very much son preference. In fact, they say if a family... like, you know, if a couple does not have a son, the man has prerogative to marry another woman so that he can, you know ...have...a...kind of, you know, have a son who will carry on the family lineage. So there is son preference. But of course, in my father's case most probably because he never had a sister of his own, so he might have had that kind of , you know,, yearning for a daughter.

C S Lakshmi: Where were you born and what was your father?

Jarjum Ete: I was born in this place called Along²⁷¹. Actually my father comes from a village. Originally he was born in a place called Laggi but that village, I think, lots of children used to die and so my grandfather had moved out to another place called Tego. So, but we are all the siblings were born and brought up in Along which is the district headquarters of West Siang. Of

²⁷¹ A city in Manipur.

course, those days it was undivided Siang²⁷². But now this is the district headquarters of West Siang. We call it Along on records but people call it Alop.

C S Lakshmi: And what was your father?

Jarjum Ete: Oh, my father was a political interpreter. In Assamese²⁷³ they used to call them *dubhashi*. They still have these posts in the government. They were kind of, you know, communicators for the administration and the people. So people who could speak more than one language.

C S Lakshmi: They are like translators?

Jarjum Ete: Ya, they are interpreters, political interpreters, translators.

C S Lakshmi: So they interpreted like court cases and other things?

Jarjum Ete: Ya, they used to, in our days, when we were small children, they used to even do arbitration, negotiations.

C S Lakshmi: Okay

Jarjum Ete: Ya, and even quite a few like, you know, criminal cases also I think they did. But civil cases of course they used to dispose.

C S Lakshmi: What were the other interests of your father. I am asking because he brought you all up so differently.

Jarjum Ete: Hmm. He actually takes it with a pinch of salt, but I tell him like, you know, we basically grew up under our mother's shadow rather than the father's. Like, you know,, although it is a patriarchal society. He was hardly around when we were growing up. Of course he used to come on annual holidays, vacations to stay with us during our school breaks and all. And he was known for his sporting spirit and ...a ...he was known and a very good hunter. He was known as a hunter also. And there are few other talents he had. Of course, the best I remember is how he used to teach us about looking at problems from different aspects, you know, perspectives. Once he was peeling a *supari*, *tamul* (betelnut) , you know,, like the skin was, you know, this long thread he just kept kind of , you know, drawing it out and it became a long one and he said "Can you jump over it?" So all of us children jumped across the rope and then he said "Okay lengthwise you try" and we couldn't do it. So he said "Never look at problems from just one side", like you know. Those kind of small things he used to like, you know,.....he...he was a good father. I say (Laughs)

²⁷² West and East Siang are districts in the state of Arunachal Pradesh.

²⁷³ The language spoken in parts of Arunachal Pradesh and other northeast Indian states. The word Assamese is English.

C S Lakshmi: Jarjum, tell us about your mother and how did she marry your father?

Jarjum Ete: My mother actually comes from, she is also from the Galo tribe but there is, we have different sub-tribes. So my father, he belongs to the sub-tribe called the Karkas and my mother belongs to the sub-tribe called the Pugos, Pugos. So...actually their marriage was I believe was one of the very interesting episodes of their time, , you know, history, kind of. Some educated people say it is much better than Romeo and Juliet (Laughs)

C S Lakshmi: Really?

Jarjum Ete: Actually my mother was given in marriage when she was still a very young child and then when she grew up she didn't want to get married with that man. She realized... although the family was well off, rich and, you know, well-known family but the man she was supposed to be married to was really not very up to mark. Not exactly a dud or a fool, but not very smart either. So she didn't want to you know, live with that man. She negotiated and finally convinced her father-in-law that, if you would expect me to live in this village with one of your nephews or someone, do you think you would be happy? And my father-in-law, who would have expected me to be your own daughter-in-law, and since you also agree that I can't live with your son, and I cannot be forced to stay with someone else. So it seems he actually lobbied with her own father-in-law like, you know, and finally she got kind of relieved from that marriage, and then she was undergoing some trainings in weaving and little basic schooling in Pasighat. Pasighat is the present district headquarters of East Siang. And it is also the first place where actually schooling came in and we also had the first college 'The Jawaharlal Nehru College' in that place. Of course it was, this was in the early 50's. So since my father... my mother's name is Gamde, she is in fact an Ete. Her, you know, maiden name is Gamde Ete, the tribe into which I am also married. And my father—his name is Sokjar Gamlin. So my father, as a government employee, used to travel. So I think, that's the way they met at Pasighat and their's is a love marriage. And because this was also the first marriage between the Pugo, you know, the Pugo sub-tribe and the Karka. Both of which actually were warring , you know, sub-tribes of the same tribe. So people had lots of problems accepting that marriage, but finally....

C S Lakshmi: So it was really one of those inter-tribal marriages?

Jarjum Ete: Ya. You could call it. Now it's very commonplace for these people from these sub tribes to marry each other but theirs was the first one and socially there was so much of reluctance and in fact resistance from my uncles and many other influential people of the place.

C S Lakshmi: Is age a factor in marriage, like an older woman can marry a younger person.

Jarjum Ete: Am...initially we, I was personally under the impression that it's always an elder man who marries a younger woman. But of late I realised that those days also even elder woman had married a younger man.

C S Lakshmi: That is because of....

Jarjum Ete: Ha, most probably because of some kind of compatibility or, you know, it was accepted. Of course even if it is an elder man who marries a younger woman or vice versa, the men most of the times end up having more than one wife (laughs)

C S Lakshmi: Ya.

Jarjum Ete: It doesn't make much of difference to them.

C S Lakshmi: And where did you study? And can you tell me about your educational background.

Jarjum Ete: I had my schooling at hometown. Started at a nursery school. It used to be called Nehru Memorial English School. And from there I was shifted to Ramakrishna Mission School run by of course R. K. Mission, Matha Mission. That's all in Along. And normally the Ramakrishna Missions they actually have only boys schools. But the one in our place they had co-education where of course girls had non-residential schooling. After I did my matriculation, I got married, and after marriage I did my pre-university and graduation from the Itanagar college, which actually used to be a night college affiliated with the Punjab University in the early 80's because of the Assam agitation²⁷⁴ being on the peak those days. So the only college...is here. It was affiliated to Punjab University. And then after a gap of about seven years I joined the University just to have an experience of how a University feels like. So I did my Masters in English Literature.

C S Lakshmi: And you managed to do all this with four children?

Jarjum Ete: Ya, in fact I have had five children. Unfortunately my second child didn't survive. Two months old when he died, and we didn't know what exactly happened. It was a sudden kind of thing. And ya, actually in fact, when I was in my tenth standard my mother's cousin-sister, she and her husband they actually came to ask for my hands and my parents actually took it lightly. Then later on when they thought it was serious they talked to me and I said nothing doing. I am not interested in getting married. I want to study and all. But again there was lots of family pressure. Like, you know, they said it is within the family, you can't say no on the face. So you give your justification. So on the day when the boy was brought, I said I have no intentions of getting married because right now I want to at least do my graduation, that's the priority, and I am interested in academics. And then my would-be husband, he was actually working as a lecturer in Assam Engineering College, so he said of course, in our community there are not many educated girls, and if someone is interested about studies one should really go for it. And then he had a rider of course: if you are really keen about studies you can, you know, even if you are married, also you can continue. On that note, the dialogue was over, and then I realised the next morning everyone said I was engaged to him. Actually I didn't know it was an engagement talk. But finally after my board exams were over and I had gone down to Bombay for my school excursion and when I came back I was told that I was going to get married next week. And then I got married and when my board exams came out after the marriage I had good marks and I negotiated and of course he stood by his words. So every time I was pregnant I was writing a paper and in-laws used to laugh like, you know, okay every child is writing an exam (laughs)

²⁷⁴ Protest against illegal migrants from Bangladesh.

Finally I graduated. Later on, of course, after my post graduation, when I wanted to do my Ph.D., he was laughing at me. Ya I remember I had promised for continued education but I didn't realise it was going to be a life-long education (laughs). But he has been good. In fact I still remember when I was writing my exams he used to baby-sit in the staff room like, you know, bottle-feeding the baby. And he also underwent lots of social pressure from his peers like, you know, people who used to come and tell him okay, fine, as a man why do you need to let your wife, you know, go for night classes and all. If you have decided to help her out then you suffer like, you know, you baby sit and lots of societal pressures were on him also. But he stood by me. And I am happy that he did that.

C S Lakshmi: Jarjum, you studied in English medium and you also speak very good Hindi and does the Galo tribe itself have a language? Does it have a script?

Jarjum Ete: Actually Galos we have a very rich, you know, a...a dialect. But we really don't have our own script. Many of us use, prefer to use Roman script, and (pause) otherwise some people like, you know, in writing use Devnagari²⁷⁵ also. But neither of the scripts actually help us to kind of really write our own dialect properly. But we have a group called "The Galo Welfare Society"; one wing of it is now working on evolving a script for the Galos.

C S Lakshmi: Do you speak that language at home or do you speak English and Hindi basically?

Jarjum Ete: It depends on which generation and which place you are in (laughs)

C S Lakshmi: Aa....

(...)

Jarjum Ete: Ya, and especially for-group meetings and all where, you know, we have to deal with the Galo women and that too from the rural background. So we have to use the language and of course our language again, the dialect that we have is ...they are two types. One is the day to day language that we speak for the communication but then there is this more refined kind of language the elders use for public speaking.

C S Lakshmi: Hm....Hm....

Jarjum Ete: And then there is the more religious, ritualistic language, which I do understand, but I can't speak.

(...)

²⁷⁵ Devanāgarī is a script used to write several North Indian languages, including Sanskrit, Hindi, Marathi, Sindhi, Bihari, Bhili, Konkani, Bhojpuri, Nepali from Nepal and sometimes Kashmiri and Romani. It is written and read from left to right.

C S Lakshmi: Is there any rich literature, like folk literature they have, is there tribal literature with myths and legends and... available in that language?

Jarjum Ete: Ya, in fact my husband's younger uncle, paternal uncle, he is a folklorist.

C S Lakshmi: Aa...ha

Jarjum Ete: And there are some younger generation people also now engaging in folk literature. In fact we have very rich folk-lore and folk-songs. Ya, despite of our cultural life, actually, not much has been done. That's still a very virgin field for our younger generation to work on, and unfortunately the elder generation people are fading out very fast.

C S Lakshmi: So do you know any folk songs?

Jarjum Ete: Not exactly, not exactly

C S Lakshmi: I was about to make you sing one song.

Jarjum Ete: Not folk songs. We used to learn, like, you know, were taught, when we were very small, but I don't think I can recollect it and sing it right now (with laugh). Maybe in a more conducive place like a fireplace or something like, in the evenings (laughs), with a little drink (laughs)

(...)

C S Lakshmi: Jarjum, from what you said, there are many tribes in Arunachal Pradesh and did they have different religious practices, and was there an influence of other religions?

Jarjum Ete: I think there has been influences, of course, we have more than 25 major groups and as many as 100 plus minor tribes and sub-tribes. And each one of course have their own unique practices, rituals, even beliefwise, they have faith systems and the people who have been in touch with the Ahoms, or the people from the plains of Assam, they have a tendency to kind of practicing Vaishnavism²⁷⁶ and in some cases Shaivism²⁷⁷ also and there are two tribes in Eastern Arunachal the Khamtis and Singhos who practiced Hinayana Buddhism²⁷⁸ akin to the one practiced in Thailand and Sri Lanka. And then we also have Mahayana Buddhists²⁷⁹ in Western Arunachal among the Monpas and Sherdukpen. In between we have the group of people who call themselves the descendants of the first man, Abo Tani,²⁸⁰ and this group also have their own within their own groups they have their own practices. But, ever since the missionaries have come in, both Christian and Hindu Missionaries, we have lots of proselytisation by the churches

²⁷⁶ One of the principal divisions of Hinduism. Its adherents worship Vishnu.

²⁷⁷ a branch of Hinduism that worships Siva as the Supreme God.

²⁷⁸ One of the oldest forms of Buddhism still in existence. It focuses on monasticism and the struggle to achieve a saintly life rather than on attaining complete enlightenment and Buddhhood; therefore, it is called the "Lesser Vehicle."

²⁷⁹ One of the major branches of Buddhism.

²⁸⁰ Primal ancestor of the Donyi-Polo religion indigenous to Arunachal Pradesh.

and also an effort of organising the, you know, indigenous groups to resist further proselytisation. This is basically been organised by the frontal groups of the Sangh Parivar.²⁸¹ There are different banners, different organisations, so called social organisations of the Sangh Parivars. There are influences, of course.

C S Lakshmi: And also resistances?

Jarjum Ete: Ha, it's actually, if you had time you could have met some more people, but, what's also happening is actually there were efforts to Hinduise the tribal population in many groups. But unfortunately because of our food habits, our own unique cultures, you know, which is so different from the Hindu fold, you know, and especially among the educated people, people who are aware of the Varna system of Hindu groups, like, you know, they say even if you become Hindus we cannot be among the higher castes so at the most may be Shudras.²⁸² And who wants to be a Shudra whereas we are, like, you know, very proud people as ourselves. So that way Hinduisation couldn't take root, but again there are people who have been perhaps to some extent benefited by their proximity with the groups. We know a few cases at least.

C S Lakshmi: The question of cow slaughter is also a big thing, isn't it?

Jarjum Ete: Ya, in fact I have been waiting for the day when the state would sometime say, you know, 'the cow slaughter is banned in the country' and you cannot do it in Arunachal and how the people would rise to the occasion (with laugh). It's not possible to ban it here.

C S Lakshmi: Ya.

Jarjum Ete: But lots of people are, you know, changing food habits in terms of maybe people are becoming health conscious, and they are starting to compare food habits, and how vegetarianism can be better than non-vegetarian like, you know, and how...in fact, interesting things like, comments like, you know,—okay the Muslims are, you know, hot blooded basically because they eat cow meat and all, you know,, beef and all. So those kinds of things go on and lots of elites are associated with both Christianisation and also the Pro-Hindu activities.

C S Lakshmi: Also animal sacrifice is a big part of your rituals.

Jarjum Ete: Of course

²⁸¹ The Sangh Parivar is a loose "family" (*parivar*) of organizations, which promote the ideology of Hindutva. Hindutva proponents believe in a Hindu nation or community that includes Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists. Sangh organisations are anti-Communist, anti-socialist, and pro-business; they are considered to be on the political "right" wing.

²⁸² The lowest of the four Hindu varnas, believed to have been born of Brahma's feet. A Shudra enjoyed no rights or privileges. He was not permitted to perform any sacrifices or homa, read or learn the Vedas or recite the mantras. A Shudra could marry only another Shudra. He was not allowed to enter temples and could only serve the upper three castes as a slave, barber, blacksmith or cobbler. Their status is only higher than harijans, or Dalits.

C S Lakshmi: Like the Mithun sacrifice.²⁸³

Jarjum Ete: Of course

C S Lakshmi: Is one of the major things.

Jarjum Ete: Ya

C S Lakshmi: So it's a totally different kind of approach to life.

Jarjum Ete: Ya. Very true. (...)

(...)

C S Lakshmi: What is the position of girls' education in your tribe Jarjum?

Jarjum Ete: My tribe is in fact, that way, I think, we are in a better position, female literacy wise. 1991 census supposedly said we had 46% female literacy in my group of tribe, you know, Galo females, and I think the statistics taken in 2001 also says we are much better.

C S Lakshmi: So girls have been encouraged to study?

Jarjum Ete: Ya, administration has in fact ever since we are small children, we learned that girl's education was being encouraged. I remember there was no single girl in my community, like in my colony, who didn't go to school. Those days, in the early 60's and late 60's, and even now, they say all children must go to school, but of course back home in the villages, young girls most of them cannot really kind of continue school education because, you know, many of them are withdrawn by mothers who have a brood of younger children to be taken care of. And many girls dropped out from the schools because the priority is the home front, and for economic reasons also young girls do drop out. If the family kind of says we cannot support all the children, and if the son or brother has to go for higher education, that becomes the priority. And I know many young girls who have discontinued their own, you know, higher education or even senior school education taken a little job and supported brothers who have gone into professional courses and all those things. So that kind of prioritisation in the society for boys' higher education also has pushed back the girls to some extent. General...general literacy has gone up among the girls but again they are not qualified enough to compete in the job market or especially for better jobs.

C S Lakshmi: Wasn't there a woman in your mother's class who rose very high and who was later on in politics.

Jarjum Ete: Ya, she... she was I think junior to my mother. That, you are talking about Mrs. Omem Moyong Deori.

²⁸³ New year festival, in which an animal-- either a pig or a mithun (ox, or "Indian bison")—is sacrificed as offering to the Supreme God, Tingkao Ragwang. This is preceded by a competitive catching of the animal; after the sacrifice of the pig, the spleen is examined to find out the omen for the future.

C S Lakshmi: Yes.

Jarjum Ete: Ya, she was I think junior to my mother in the school. She graduated from Shillong and then of course she became Rajyasabha M P from our state. And she even now is one of the invitees of the Congress Working Committee and she had headed the Arunachal Pradesh Congress Committee also. So first generation educated woman.

C S Lakshmi: What about child marriages? Can you tell us about it? What are your own early memories of it?

Jarjum Ete: In fact, these people who are supposedly the descendants of Abo-Tani; the Tani group have lots of problems about child marriages. In fact, my tribe also. We used to have lots of victims of child marriages and finally if the girl grew up and said no I am not getting married to this man, and something like that and they used to, forced her to, you know, to be taken to the in-laws and even brothers and uncles and fathers like, you know, they used to drag the girl back and, you know, deliver her to the in-laws doorsteps. And I still remember it because my father was one of those political interpreters with whom usually those, you know, girls who kind of came to the administration seeking help and all those were kept in custody with political interpreters families. And I remember one actually when I was in the Kindergarten while coming back home I had a little mishap on the road, a bicyclist hit me, and my father had taken me to the hospital for the first-aid. And on the way back...because it was Kindergarten school perhaps it was in morning hours. So instead of taking me home because he had to attend to his council meeting, he had taken me to the council hall we call it the Kebong Ghor. Ghor in Assamese is house. Kebong is of course our council. Then I realised they were having a meeting about one of the girls who was at that time staying with us, you know, for some time. And I had grown fond of that, you know, girl. And then I heard them say like, you know, she has to be taken away and she was crying, shouting for the help and saying, "No, I don't want to go" and then I saw them dragging her and I remember I had picked up some pebbles and I was throwing at those people who were dragging her away, you know, that was a real kind of , you know, touching scene I still can visualise; it's fresh as the same day, after all these years, may be about thirty-five-thirty-six years. I can still really vividly remember it, and even today-- of course in my tribe it has gone down very drastically. We don't have child marriages happening right now. Although we get to hear about few stray cases where it's, you know, very educated, well-placed people, , you know,, doing this. And they have perhaps taken care that the girl is at least not forced into it. But there is another group, the majority group in fact, called the Nishis. This is basically in the central belt of Arunachal. And they still have, you know, continued to do this. And many people of course say this-- that they stopped practising child marriage-- but recently we were on tour to one of the district called Kurung-Ku, me and one activist there, one young girl from Nagaland who is working for an NGO in that pocket, she mentioned that two and half years old girl was recently married off. So that is the scenario, and it is one of our major concerns because many young girls are being taken out of the school to be forced into marriage and that kind.

C S Lakshmi: And women don't have property rights also.

Jarjum Ete: Aa. Property right. Immovable properties...no

C S Lakshmi: Like land?

Jarjum Ete: No, no land, no houses. But of course when it comes to government land influential families, their women, their daughters are having access to government land. In fact, so much so that because there is no Land Ceiling Act in the state, people with, influential people with many wives, each of their wives is getting land, government land. And many may be poor men might not also be getting access to government land. And movable property...parents who have their own traditional riches, they do part with lots of jewellery and artifacts, you know, antiques. Those are normally given to daughters.

C S Lakshmi: During marriage?

Jarjum Ete: During marriage. And actually the traditional marriage goes on till the woman is dead. It starts with the engagement ceremony and then ends till she is dead, like , you know,. There is so much of *lena-dena*.

C S Lakshmi: Aa.....ha

Jarjum Ete: Ya, its more of a....

C S Lakshmi: It's a continuous process of giving.

Jarjum Ete: Ya, it's a continuous (...)

(...)

C S Lakshmi: Jarjum, I think your days of activism began when you threw stones at those people when you were just a kid. When did you join the Arunachal Pradesh Women's Welfare Society and what were your activities initially?

Jarjum Ete: I actually joined the organisation in May 1985. That happened accidentally, because I was part of a women's cultural group of my own group, and since I was also actively involved with the festivals of, you know, organising festivals. Especially my own community we have this Mopin festival²⁸⁴, it's agricultural festival just before the beginning of the agricultural season in the month of April. First week of April-- to be exact, its 5th of April we have this. And that year like by the end of the festival our group realised we had more than 4000 rupees contributed by well-wishers and hosts and hostesses. So we didn't know how to use the money and different ideas we tried but we said okay fine and we all agreed to organise a get-together and spend the money. Fortunately or unfortunately everyone who were invited to the, you know, little party again they put into a kitty, and we had much more than what we were actually trying to spend by organising that little party. And then Mrs. Lomte Riba who is actually the founder secretary of the Arunachal Pradesh Women's Welfare Society, she is also one of the forerunners of our tribe's women. And her husband was a senior director in the state government those days. And she said, well, we have this organisation called the Arunachal Pradesh Women's Welfare Society

²⁸⁴ Mopin is a festival for wealth and prosperity, good health and universal happiness. It includes smearing of rice powder on faces and is celebrated for five days.

which was registered in 1981. Founded in '79 but registered in '81 and that has been lying defunct because all the founder members had to go out of Itanagar on transfer with their spouses, and that has been lying defunct. So maybe, if the women agree, we could revive this organisation by putting this money in. All of us agreed and everyone who was around, they also supported, and also even encouraged, saying, you know, our tribe is well known as a forerunner in the state and why not, you know, why can't the women from this group help in reviving the organisation and that's how we pool in the money and the organisation was revived and they inducted me as their chief auditor to keep books and all, but besides keeping books I was the woman Friday of the group. I used to drive my General Secretary up and down Itanagar and Nahanagar to, you know, on my scooter. I used to ride a Bajaj scooter those days. And ever since then I have been with the organisation as a voluntary worker. In fact we still don't have paid staffers; all of us are volunteers. A couple of full-time volunteers and others are part-time volunteers and it is a membership based organisation. And we have been perhaps able to mobilise some sections of the women today, looking back like, you know.

C S Lakshmi: Weren't you also doing some business of your own?

Jarjum Ete: Ya. In fact, I actually learnt, you know, dealing with money especially from my childhood days. My mother used to be a very good agricultural producer. She is a peasant woman and she used to have all those seasonal vegetables, and fruits. So I used to organise her marketing when I was still in school, because all my elder brothers used to be in boarding schools. So I was the eldest at home, and my father was hardly ever there. And when I got married-- actually my husband because he is eldest in the family, he took over the education of one of his cousin brothers and his youngest brother. And then his salary, we realised, was not enough to support all of us. So my uncle also, like, you know, my husband's uncle rather, the one who got me engaged and married to my husband, he had this space in Itanagar. He was a former legislator so he had some land. He said, "why don't you start something?" and suggested that printing business is a respectable one so even a women won't have any problem, you know, running the business. And then I had lots of supportive structures with me, basically because my, you know, former secretary of the school, Swami Gautamanandji, he used to visit us whenever he came down to Itanagar and then when I told him that I need to do some business he took me to the, you know, officer-in-charge of this Small Industries Service Institute, SISI, Itanagar. Those days there used to be one gentleman called Ranjit Singh, he was a Sardarji. He was willing to help, and I got to talk to the banker in the State Bank of India, Mr. J K Sarkar, Jayawant Kumar Sarkar. Everyone said okay, we will help, so I started a printing unit.

It was a letterpress. Now it's quite antiquated, but that was also the first private printing unit in Itanagar. So we had the government press, but it was not accessible to the public. So I started getting into that. So I was busy with those. Trying to make a little more money to substantiate what my husband was earning to support the family.

C S Lakshmi: Didn't you also run a Chinese restaurant?

Jarjum Ete: That was after I joined the organisation.

C S Lakshmi: Achha.²⁸⁵

Jarjum Ete: It was part of the growth of the business. Ya, we realised we didn't have a good place to eat out and, you know, to take out family, on weekends, if someone wanted to go out. And I had this very lofty idea about thinking people coming together, its something like those-- in Bengal they have those Addas.²⁸⁶

C S Lakshmi: Yes

Jarjum Ete: So I thought it would be kind of Adda where people could take out their families and also, you know, some friends would like to sit around the table and talk about things. Basically share thoughts and ideas, concerns, but I think I might have been a bit too early for the place. I realised more than what I actually thought would happen I realised school children in uniforms they were bunking classes and spending time in the restaurant. (laughs) And sometime later I also got to know that very responsible people were coming with, I initially thought, okay, friends are coming, you know, for tea and all. Later I learned in some cases the people were having affairs and they were using my place like, you know, to spend time. And ultimate was like--those days actually bar licences were not given. We didn't have an excise , you know, acting place in the state. And even those days, you know, drinking in public places were not allowed. So police officers, you know, the District Administration Senior officers they used to bring their own booze and like, you know, drink it in my restaurant. During my absence, of course, I never saw anything happening during my presence. And one day actually I was told by my manager, who was a lady, she said actually police had raided our place. I said for what? They were looking for booze. I said, we don't give booze, why did they do that? Then I was told these people the officers who came for the raid some of them actually used to come with their own booze and like, you know, drink in our place. So I went to the District Administration, and I said nothing doing, you either give me a bar licence or tell your officers like no, it's not done but...and people like us we get implicated. I am also an activist. Apart from making money, you know, honest money out of my business, I am also a responsible person. So you either give me a bar licence or maybe you talk to your officers. I know because my people say that your officers are involved, so they cannot implicate me. So those kinds of situations and finally when I got into activism more and more, I realised the unique way we had liquid cash exchanges without your own personal presence you are run into loss. Then I decided to wind up.

(...)

C S Lakshmi: Jarjum, can you tell us something about the *Kebong*, what a *Kebong* is? And what was the *Vikas Kebong* movement all about? And how far were you involved in that movement?

²⁸⁵ Term indicating assent, e.g., "I see."

²⁸⁶ A Bengali cultural phenomenon; a friendly, casual conversation at an informal gathering of like-minded people, during leisure hours; can take place in a public place (restaurant or coffee house) or in a private setting.

Jarjum Ete: Kebong actually is the word for a council among the Adis, of course the 1950's schedule is of the tribes²⁸⁷ in the Constitution of India actually doesn't have it but people who are listed as Abos in the schedule list actually call themselves Adis and Kebong is Adi word. And it used to be actually normally, you know, the council of elders, village elders, wise people of course sans women (with laugh)--wise women were not there. So later on the State Administration, they started incorporating these village councils into their system of administration. This Vikas Kebong actually was started by Sanjay Ghosh.²⁸⁸ We had NGO representatives from all the states of North-East and we had some discussions about how to involve people in the process of development, initiated by the government, and how the marginalised, rural people, especially the women, can participate and become partners of development. And since, you know, the Kebong doesn't have women traditionally on its councils, we said the Vikas Kebong would be a different kind of council. It will have women like, you know. So people like us joined. Those days I was secretary general of the Arunachal Pradesh Women Welfare Society. It was in mid 90's, and we had started participating in training programmes, capacity building and in-between, like those days Association of Voluntary Agencies for Rural Development-North East (AVARD-NE) the organisation through which Sanjay and his team was working.

C S Lakshmi: Association of Volunteers?

Jarjum Ete: Ha, Association of Volunteers for Rural Development among North-East. They were based in Jorhat and they were working very actively in Majuli Island [in Assam], the largest river island, and perhaps the initiatives of the NGOs in involving the marginalised people got into the way of vested interest groups and that's how we look at it when very soft spoken, very kind hearted soul like Sanjay was picked up, and even today it is a debate if he is alive or he was killed by ULFA.²⁸⁹ So those kinds of things and it kind of pushed back the whole movement, and that's it. But of course after Sanjay was picked up and his whereabouts were not known, and in fact on the demand of the ULFA the Association of Voluntary Agencies for Rural Development-North East (AVARD-NE) was disbanded, and they moved out, today his friends and partners, they are all over north-east working in different capacities from different forums and they are doing very good works and his dream of Vikas Kebong has not happened, but we continue to work in different ways.

C S Lakshmi: Are there women in Kebongs now?

Jarjum Ete: In the traditional Kebongs...

C S Lakshmi: Ya.

²⁸⁷There are over 500 communities recognized by the government as Scheduled Tribes and therefore eligible to receive special benefits and to compete for reserved seats in legislatures and schools. A number of traits establish tribal identity. These include language, social organization, religious affiliation, economic patterns, geographic location, and self-identification. Recognized tribes typically live in hilly regions somewhat remote from caste settlements; they generally speak a language recognized as tribal. Unlike castes, which are part of a complex and interrelated local economic exchange system, tribes tend to form self-sufficient economic units.

²⁸⁸ An activist on behalf of water and soil management, who was eventually kidnapped and murdered.

²⁸⁹ United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) was formed on April 7, 1979 to establish a "sovereign socialist Assam" through an armed struggle.

Jarjum Ete: Ya, In fact what we did was also the Arunachal Pradesh Women Welfare Society, the organisation that I have been working with, in 1994 we started mobilising the State network and my home district west Siang, it was also one of the places where we didn't have women on the councils. So the coming of the APWWS network in the district headquarters, women started intervening in cases, especially where a victim or a appellant was a woman, and there were lots of initial resistances by the system, especially the patriarchs of the councils, but finally today every woman-related case the District Administration sends for the participation of APWWS representative. So, and in many other communities women have started participating in councils, although unofficially but their presence is very much there. But of course there are other tribes where it's not happening yet. But things are moving since mid 90s.

C S Lakshmi: Jarjum, what exactly was the mandate of APWWS?

Jarjum Ete: APWWS is for, its objectives and bylaws, it says it will work for the uplift of the status of women in Arunachal Pradesh.

C S Lakshmi: That is its mandate?

Jarjum Ete: Ya. So we have to do everything possible and legally allowed and to achieve that.

C S Lakshmi: It's also been involved with some fact-finding, research and some public campaigning on some issues. Can you tell us about that?

Jarjum: Ya. Fact finding especially when there have been cases of atrocities against women, single or more than one. We have tried to send teams to do independent fact-findings, because many times we get controversial reports and there are hardly any redressals in cases where such things happened. Finally which end up in political debates. So we have tried and send independent teams. And campaigns--we have been doing like, you know, since the beginning. In fact, as I mentioned earlier, I joined in 1985. Prior to that they had done some works with adult literacy of adult women, and vocational trainings, and then when it comes to public campaigns. Ever since we joined, we have done public meetings and campaigns on political education of voters. Basically on democratic rights of citizens and the importance of the electoral, you know, franchise exercises, and of course very much again child marriages, forced marriages, polygamy, on land rights of women and of course the customary laws versus women's rights and we also had been to some extent engaged in the debate of development, how it's happening, and many people have been saying, and many of our own colleagues in the movement have been saying, why women should talk about education and literacy and health or, you know, why about big dams and all. But we have tried to kind of educate ourselves, also in the process of working on different issues. It's not just customary laws that affect women. When we are talking about the status of women and upholding their rights or kind of upgrading their status in the society, we tried to look that the problems from a very holistic point and we cannot compartmentalise what is women's issues and what is not. So that way the organisation has evolved quite, I think far now and today many of our colleagues are happy that we are engaged in different debates of, you know, development and of our own society. Now they say women are not just women in a corner of the world, but they are part of the larger world, and so the mandate has been enlarged, you

know... There is kind of a visual enlargement also apart from of course the mental horizons being broadened.

C S Lakshmi: Your organisation also took a stand on anti-liquor laws. That was quite controversial at that time, wasn't it?

Jarjum Ete: We tried to. We said initially, actually, till about the late 80s we didn't have a liquor policy in the state. So it was almost like a dry state although of course drinks used to be smuggled and brought into the state from Assam and people used to buy at exorbitant prices but since we have our traditional drinks, you know, home brews, and which was also available in the local markets. When the State Government wanted to introduce the excise policy, we tried to organise the women brewers. Unfortunately they thought we are against the local brewers, you know. And of course the government we tried to say like, you know, it would be a wise idea to do kind of, you know, balancing between how much resources, revenues you want to generate and also look at what kind of impact it will have on the people's health. But the government pushed through the thing and of course we didn't have a space for political debates those days because our priorities were immediate women's rights and in fact we tried to look at this also as women's rights to home brews, if they can do it in more hygienic way why can't the state promote it. Of course today, under tourism, you know, development programmes the government says yes, we are trying to promote the local brews. Of course, but there is almost a gap of twenty years. Ten-twenty years.

C S Lakshmi: There was also some criticism of these women using battery acids and other things?

Jarjum Ete: Yes, that was one problem where actually we said to the women, if they want to continue brewing and putting liquor on the market, they have to do it under sanitised, controlled, you know, hygienic situations. Unfortunately the women whom we wanted to help, they got the wrong message, and they didn't participate in our discussions. And so we couldn't push through our, you know, political agenda of intervening in the government's, you know, excise policy making. (...)

(...)

C S Lakshmi: Jarjum, development policies for women like women's empowerment through several groups or micro-credit programmes²⁹⁰ and other things. What are your views on that?

Jarjum Ete: Perhaps if a government has formulated such policies, it must be on the basis of experiences, good experiences they have had in other places. And in Arunachal also SHGs (Self Help Groups) and micro finance things are happening in small ways, not very big. Especially through the DRDAs (District Rural Development Agencies). Unfortunately in my own village, rather my husband's village, I realised when the groups were formed, one, the person who was

²⁹⁰ The extension of very small loans to poor people who lack collateral, steady employment and a verifiable credit history, and therefore cannot meet qualifications to gain access to traditional credit.

behind the formation of the group perhaps didn't orient the women. So in the process the village people they have been divided vertically into two groups: the people who have benefited from the DRDA programme and others who haven't. And then from other places the experience has been like this SHGs have been promoted by the people in power. You know, it's not like the government programme for everyone who is in need of it. But it's a government programme which will benefit only the people from the party which voted the party to power. So that kind of division has come into the society. Unfortunately, as tribal societies, we have lots of community values, where collectivity is the essence. Like even if you go to the farms, it has to be collective work, most of the time. And if you are building a house also, it is a collective work of the whole village. But unfortunately SHGs they have been seen to divide the women. I don't blame the policy but the way the policies are implemented, you know, the agencies are not sensitised, in terms of their own personal orientations about how to organise the women, how to teach them, how to help them, you know, the hand holding techniques they also don't seem to know. And then also they themselves are perhaps not capacitated to, you know, execute these programmes. So perhaps we need more capacity building of the deliverers themselves. (...)

(...)

C S Lakshmi: You have some very strong views on legalisation of prostitution. Can you share them with us?

Jarjum Ete: Sure. Actually those days in the early 80s when I was starting to do my printing unit. Since I had taken loan from the bank, I used to work very hard, over-time, you know, like early hours in the night, morning rather. And those days I used to be so mobile and because I was one of the maybe the night animals in the township. I also got to know that prostitution is happening and then of course after joining the APWWS, we used to discuss about how like, you know, the tribal women are getting into the prostitution which is not a tribal activity. It might be the oldest profession on earth, but, you know, prostitution is a commercial, you know, exercise and activity and which was total alien. So we used to discuss about it, and towards the end...later part of the 80s we once did a follow up on a case and the police people said okay we are like, the dragnet is coming closer, we are kind of doing in the person, the pimp, and any day he would be now like, you know, arrested. So we were very anxiously waiting for the day when this pimp would be booked. Unfortunately no news, later when I talked with the police officer a senior police officer, he said actually we had to call off the whole exercise because the government said that Arunachal is a tribal state so we cannot extend the Immoral Traffic Prevention Act. And like, you know, there is no prostitution happening here. And that was a big dilemma and since we were fighting on many other issues vis-a-vis women's rights and their status, this had to take a back seat. But since early 90s, ever since we started hearing about AIDS epidemic coming into India and all those, we said nothing doing like, you know, women are likely to get exposed because they would be the worst sufferer because (1)they don't have access to information; (2) they don't have control over themselves, their reproductive selves; (3) with this kind of, you know, rampant prostitution going on you cannot keep a tab on who is doing what. So we started debating on this. And then we also realised that people don't want to talk it, because maybe they think it's below their dignity to talk about prostitution. Even if many might be indulging in it, you know, in it themselves. But it has not reached the public platform as a, you know, matter of concern. Now in 1993 we talked about it and since then I have been saying, okay, like if the state

says we cannot extend the immoral traffic prevention act in Arunachal maybe if the girls, if the women are having no problem about putting themselves up on the market as, you know, sex workers, and if the men in our society are not ashamed of paying for the sexual services that are provided, maybe this state should better benefit by, you know, legalising it, one. Two: legalisation of prostitution perhaps may be a better option for people who are sitting home like, you know, basically the housewives who are sitting ducks for, you know, STD infections SDI, RTI everything and of course HIV. So we said at least if there is red-light proper, you know, licensed worker and no way the government can keep a tab on their health and also if we can monitor who is coming and who is not, and that may be safer at least for the society at large. Of course, this big debate is going on all over the world, especially in the feminist movement, the women's movement. Now, for people who opt for prostitution as a source of sustaining life or as a livelihood, it is their right to work. But we also have to look at things, situations where women are dragged into it, women are coerced into it, women are forced into, you know, getting into prostitution to work as prostitutes. There are trafficking of young children, young girls and even like, you know, ignorant, illiterate women. So I am as an individual, as a woman myself, I feel it is a shame that a woman is compelled to become a prostitute to earn her bread and butter, but again, if in situations where people don't want to take prostitution as a degrading profession but as something which is an alternate to everyone's life and lifestyles, maybe the State should look at it seriously. But many people think I am very radical. My whole agenda very frankly is to bring this debate into the public space. Because as a tribal society Arunachal is--invariably everyone--old and young educated-illiterate, men-women everyone--they proudly say "we are a tribal society" like, you know, it doesn't happen in our society. But very frankly, very candidly speaking, it is happening. Lots of young girls, lots of married women, unfortunately, are into prostitution and it is high time we talked about it in public. And at least if there is an effort or some attempt to legalise or some kind of, you know, official...official procedure is initiated. Maybe people will talk about it and would like to do some retrospection or introspection and say, okay, let's not do it, or let's stop it. And that's my agenda. In fact, from the commission I have requested my member secretary to write to the government a letter from the commission to provide for a forum where we can debate about this.

(...)

C S Lakshmi: Jarjum even the National Commission on Women is considered an organisation without any teeth. You are currently the chairperson of the State Commission on Women. What concrete policies do you think you will be able to bring about?

Jarjum Ete: One, of course the Constitution has lots of provisions for ensuring the equality of both men and women in society. And which actually has not been happening in my state. So right now rather than the teeth and claws our commission would look at our weightage. How much weight we can kind of, you know, put on the government to ensure the implementation of the existing policies especially to ensure the rights of the women. Of course, when we talk about the teeth that the commissions are not having, I believe it's not just legal provisions, but how you negotiate with the system or the people who are dealing with the things. If you can convince, and convincing is something an individual can do kind of, you know, when you are interacting or when you are personally convinced it is easier and perhaps possible to convince the other person to, you know, ensure that the person sees it your way. And that's a difficult thing but not

impossible again. And so far the commission is concerned as of now, it's taking time because we are the first batch. And in fact we were constituted in January 2005, but we got this office only in September, first of September it was inaugurated, and I got the telephone some two weeks back. And till then we didn't even have a typewriter. So things are--structurally it's taking time but officially again right now we have very supportive government. At least whenever we say okay this is something is happening they stand by us, especially the district administration, most of them they say okay, fine, what is it that we can do? (...) So more than the need for teeth and claws, I personally believe it's about the ability of members of the commission or people who are interested in women's empowerment and their rights protection to be able to convince, sensitise and network with the people who matter, especially the administrators, the bureaucrats, and especially with the enactment of, you know, the policies like the domestic violence act and one which is shortly coming up, the prevention of sexual harassment in workplaces, they should be our teeth and claws and not necessary the commission's own act itself. And in a place like Arunachal where all these years customary laws have prevailed over constitutional provisions, the enactment of the Women Commission Act itself in the State assembly, it kind of, you know, gives the sense to people that okay the political structure, the leadership is also keen about giving women their legal space. So I feel it's more about motivations and, you know, becoming sensitised. (...)

(...)

C S Lakshmi: Jarjum, you were also saying that Arunachalis get very irritated when they are mistaken for Nepalis.

Jarjum Ete: (Laughs)

C S Lakshmi: It happened to one of your girls.

Jarjum Ete: Ya...ya. Actually it keeps happening with most of I think Arunachalis – men, women, young boys or old men, everyone. Very interesting events like...even us, when we are walking especially on the streets of may be Delhi especially. Calcutta is I think is used to the slit eyes, you know, chinky eyes. But Delhi, Bombay, the metros, they say, you know, they just started speaking *kanchis* something like that, you know, these little words they know about Nepalis. One of our girls like, you know, she was travelling with her friends in Rajasthan near the Indo-Pak border. It seems one of the BSF jawans²⁹¹ said, 'Show your passport, you are not an Indian. So she said of course I am an Indian from North-East. I am from Arunachal Pradesh. And that jawan unfortunately didn't know where Arunachal is. (laughs) And he said but you don't look like an Indian. She said of course if you say that to me, I would also say you don't look like an Indian. You could be a Pakistani, you know, spy walking on our side of the country. So those kind of things keep happening. But hopefully, most probably, things are changing a little ,bit especially in Delhi with lots of North-East people coming in.

C S Lakshmi: So I was talking to this girl in your office who belongs to the Nishi tribe and she said that some of her tribe people said that how can we become Hindus , you know, we eat the Gods they worship.

²⁹¹ Young male soldier.

Jarjum Ete: Ya, ya. This is what they say *ki Hindu log to gai ko puja the hain. Humlog tho gai ko khathe hain. Hum inke bhagwan ko khathe hain to hum kaise Hindu ho sakte hain.*

(Hindus worship cows and we eat them. When we eat their gods how can we become Hindus?)

C S Lakshmi: Ya that thing is there definitely.

Jarjum Ete: Actually I really don't understand like, you know, when we talk about the education policy of India, Government of India, CBSC and NCERT. Our children we seem to be knowing more about the geography of the country, you know, more about the people of the different states of India, whereas other places even, you know, the educated people, the administrators, business people also, people who are in better positions in life, they also don't seem to be aware of the diversities that's all over the country.

C S Lakshmi: Because the entire North-east is taken as one block of region when they are so different.

Jarjum Ete: Ya, ya that's the most unfortunate part.

C S Lakshmi: Ya.

Jarjum Ete: For that matter when the people say what is Arunachal about, and then I have to keep thinking okay, where do I start from the East or the West? Which tribe do I start from?

C S Lakshmi: Ya.

Jarjum Ete: Diversity is too much

C S Lakshmi: Within Arunachal and within North-East the diversity is so much.

Jarjum Ete: Ya, and very big place geographically also.

C S Lakshmi: Ya.

Jarjum Ete: And politically, geo-politically we are far removed from the main.

C S Lakshmi: Ya.

C. S. Lakshmi: Jarjum you very consciously associated yourself with the larger organisations like the Indian Association for Women's Studies. How has it helped you in your evolution as an activist, as a feminist?

Jarjum Ete: I believe every association, or for that matter any interaction with someone who is from a different background, has always kind of enriched understanding and given a perspective to your maybe experiences or even thoughts-- and my association with the Indian Association of Women's Studies and my stint as Joint Secretary in IAWS for one year with, you know, the

doyens of the Indian Women's movement and Feminist movements. It has, of course, given me those insights into especially the discourse on feminism, at least a kind of philosophical, theoretical understanding of what all this feminism is about, because for me a...a I actually, as I mentioned earlier also, I got into activism per chance, and my association in the Arunachal Pradesh Women's Welfare Society was an accident. Of course the instinct to come to the defence of girls or women who need support, the empathy has always been there, but maybe we are doing things without much awareness about what's happening elsewhere, you know, and so my time spent with the feminists of India has added to my understanding, and perhaps that's why I am sitting with you here today being recorded. (laughs)

C. S. Lakshmi: You've also gone outside India. Did you attend the Beijing Conference? What was your experience?

Jarjum Ete: I was in the NGO forum²⁹² during the Beijing Conference at Huairo and in fact our organisation was accredited to the UN, that year, for the Beijing Conference and the best part was that something like *aaj tak maine samjha tha ki main akeli pagal hoon to bahut saare pagalo ke beech mein aur maaza aaya!* (Until then I'd thought I was the only mad one but I enjoyed being with other mad people!) (both laughs) So like, you know, in small places like Arunachal you feel at times you are the only one who is so concerned but when you realise there are other friends, other like-minded people all over the world, it gives you that kind of energy, the strength to go on, to move on. And also to survive the kind of pressures at times, especially as human rights defenders or even as women's activists. Now of course it has gained a bit of acceptance, but those days it was quite different. And Beijing especially gave me the exposure to, you know, the best part that I learned from my Beijing experience, about the sexuality of women. Because this is something I had personally not had time to give a thought about. But sharing platforms with the lesbians, the prostitutes, you know, those kind of insights which I never had. So I went to the tents and, you know, tried to understand, and it added to my life and its quality perhaps.

C. S. Lakshmi: Meeting these women actually....

Jarjum Ete: Ya, meeting them and listening to them, how they feel, because, you know, you grow up with your own little mores and values, and, you know, there is so much of conventionalism in whatever set up you grow up in. So I had my own limitations, you know, because I have lived in this society for so long and prostitution is something which was totally alien. And lesbianism is something may be, you know, knowing or hearing about, like a very distant story somewhere else. But that also was a reality which never was discussed earlier. But today when we hear about the larger debates on sexuality and all that at least I feel comfortable, unlike my friends perhaps who didn't get those exposures and I have come to accept things as they are. There are differences, there are different people with different values.

C. S. Lakshmi: You have also been to Pakistan. Did you go as a part of a delegation? What was your experience?

²⁹² Meeting of representatives from over 2100 non-governmental organizations from around the world parallel to the Fourth World Conference on Women at Beijing in 1995.

Jarjum Ete: Yes, it was as part of a delegation. We have this group called the National Alliance of Women, which actually came together as a post Beijing follow up group from all over India. Smaller organisations which formed alliance, and one of our agenda of course is--apart from following up the platform for action document of the, you know, UN commitments made by government of India--we have also been doing campaigns on violence and poverty. So we have this, you know, international movement going on against poverty and violence.

C. S. Lakshmi: Ya.

Jarjum Ete: It's called the World March of Women, and we had the charter going around the world. So when the charter reached India, we had to deliver it, you know, in Pakistan, to hand over to the partners in Pakistan. So that was as part of, you know, our delegation that I went. And a group was supposed to have, you know, gone across to Lahore—sorry, from Wagha into Lahore and then to Karachi, but there was some problem so I came back from Lahore. I didn't go to Karachi. But the best part was the common people, actually one peace across the border, and then we also realised, you know, small people don't have big...big says in big issues. That was some kind of helplessness people felt but otherwise a...at least since this was my first trip across to Pakistan, I realised and of course everyone said so, there is not much cultural differences also between North India and that part of Pakistan. And in fact we had good seminars and also some cultural programmes, exchanges of songs. And it was a very good experience because otherwise, you know, the media tells us like, you know, only about the wars and the....

C. S. Lakshmi: Ya

Jarjum Ete: Pickets and bomb blasts and, you know, how people are taken for underground training; militants and all those. But there is possibility of love and peace and, you know, friendship across the borders. (...)

C. S. Lakshmi: In your set of photographs I saw a photograph of yours with Clinton. How did that happen?

Jarjum Ete: Okay (laughs) I also don't know how it happened. But I got this call from the American embassy in Delhi. They said Mr. Clinton is coming to India, and we are inviting some young generation people to have an interaction with him in Bombay. And we want you to come and meet him. Then I had some problems. Because as part of the Indian People's movement and especially the women's movement, we had lots of problems about, you know, with the American policies especially vis-à-vis globalisation, and all those. I said I am not sure like, you know, if would like to come down and meet him. I said I will get back to you. They won't rest till I said yes! you know. Then I shared with my friends from all over. I sought advices, counsels from friends and well-wishers. And there were two lines of thought: people said no, protest, don't go; and some other very wise people like, you know, the more sagacious among the lot they said, Jarjum, but this is also an opportunity to put forward our thoughts through you. So let's take the opportunity and in fact many in Arunachal said, my god, world's most powerful man and they are inviting you to see him, talk to him, and you are not accepting the invitation! that's not possible! Finally, I was also convinced to make the best use of it and I accepted. That was his last trip to India as a US president. And I got to meet him, listen to him and share a few thoughts.

I even put forward a written memorandum as secretary of the National Alliance on Women. And we were only seven of us. Of course, others are very high profile young people, but I also really don't know where I got in from. (with laugh). But I was there. And it came out to be a very charismatic--of course Clinton's charisma is world renowned. Then the best part I liked about him was his ability to draw out, you know, people. You know he made us all feel so comfortable like, you know, it was not as if we are talking to the most powerful man on earth, something like that. And his keenness seemed very genuine, very sincere kind of expressions, body language and even the words. And that was very appreciative, unlike most of our Indian leaders that was a big contrast, like, you know. I have seen some of India's top people you know, listened to them in meetings and all and seen them personally from about six-seven feet distance but except Madhavrao Scindia,²⁹³ not many have been impressive.

C S Lakshmi: Jarjum, I know that you need a fireside to sing but since you have spoken about love and peace and all that, can you give us a song?

Jarjum Ete: (Laughs)

C S Lakshmi: It would be nice to end this with a song

Jarjum Ete: What kind of a song?

C S Lakshmi: Any song that you like.

Jarjum Ete: Actually the time of the day is actually not really conducive to a romantic song.

(Both laugh)

Galo song on changing seasons and growing up along with the seasons.
(It was sung late in the evening.)

Diinyii-e nyi-le-la, be-duu piimu-e duu-le-la
Loma age aasup te-na, opo piimu-e duu-le-mola
The years and seasons roll by and we grow no younger

Dumde pogro-e lenyi kuma, jaale ge damro si
Diinyii-e nyil-e la....
Like the jungle plantain and the elephant grass – we dry up...
The years roll on....

Piso hatem-e, te-rem kaate kula,
Kote hatem-e, te-rem kaate kula,
Like the **tapi** plants, and the **ekkam** leaves - a generation having grown up together

Piso pimu-e dukur tadakku, neli komji ngo,

²⁹³ A prominent Indian politician and minister from the Scindia family, who formerly ruled Gwalior, and was a 9-term member of the Lok Sabha (parliament) at the time of his death in 2001.

Then like the **tapi** blossoms, the young ones (here **neli komji** means a female) also wither away

*Pado-pa-um-e hujur kaate kula,
Pado ge gupsi lo na, guuba tadak-ku,*

Even the tender bamboos shoot up to bend with age and burden (of its leaves and branches) in the way of the older generations...

*Dumde pogro-e lenyi kuma, jaale ge damro si
Diinyii-e nyil-e la....*

like the jungle plantain and the elephant grass – we dry up...
The years roll on....

*Jiin-e ge lou-e-te, uusa kambe ye,
Lon-e ge karn-e-te, karsa kambe ye,
Karbo-ge jimi-jaamaa-ne te-si uube jiye lape,*
The sun will continue to shine infinitely and
So will the moon keep rising always
The stars will twinkle for ever,

*Aaji-ge giisa sigi, holu gasa-go,
Olo-ge si-nam sigi, holu ga-yi-go,*
The life of the young ones is but like climbing over the fence

*Dumde pogro-e lenyi kuma, jaale ge damro si
Diinyii-e nyil-e la...*

like the jungle plantain and the elephant grass – we dry up...
The years roll on....

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS:
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: INDIA

**Transcript of Lata Pratibha Madhukar
Interviewer: Aruna Bhurte**

Location: Mumbai, Maharashtra, India

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Lata Pratibha Madhukar was born in 1955 and brought up in Nagpur and has a post graduate degree in Marathi. It was during the emergency period from 1975 onwards that Lata started feeling the need to be an activist. She became an active participant in various campaigns and discussions from 1978 onwards. She worked as a lecturer and later as an anchorperson for the radio in Wardha, Maharashtra. After her marriage she moved to Mumbai and worked as a research assistant in the Research Centre for Women's Studies, SNDT Women's University, Mumbai. Later she joined the Women's Centre, (Nari Kendra) Mumbai, and was with the Centre for seven years during which time she was active in the women's rights movement. In 1991 Lata joined the Narmada Bachao Andolan, an environmental movement that questioned the basic tenets of developmental planning, as a co-coordinator. For the next nine years, she threw herself into this struggle, organizing protests, and mobilizing support and she also engaged herself in advocacy and research related to the movement. She went on to become the national convenor for the National Alliance of People's Movements. Lata is also a writer and a poet and she lives and functions from Mumbai.

Aruna Bhurte (the interviewer) has been a part of the women's movement for the last three decades. She is also working on issues of secularism and education.

Lata P.M. Transcript

Aruna Burte: Lata, we have known each other for the last twenty-two years but it is only today that we have been able to sit and talk to each other comfortably. We will talk about whatever has happened in these years. (...)²⁹⁴ Let us start with your name Lata Pratibha Madhukar, it includes your parents' name. Why don't you tell us something about them?

Lata Pratibha Madhukar: Yes, even I feel that this is a very good opportunity that I have got today, to speak about my life and SPARROW has given me this opportunity and when you are asking, even I am reviving many memories.... (..) My parents Pratibha and Madhukar have played a very important role in my life... both my mother and father and that is why I feel that every person should put the names of her mother and father in her name. I feel that my parents like other people's parents, had made a major contribution to my life. (..) My mother and father were from two totally different backgrounds, although they belonged to the same community, my mother's background was totally different. Their economic status was very different. My mother's father was in the military and then in the railway. So she got an opportunity to travel to many places, learn many languages and she was introduced to various cultures and she herself was very talented, very artistic, (..) and once when I wrote about her, I wrote how she could transform even a torn cloth to something very beautiful. She had an eye for beauty. (..) My father was brought up as an orphan since childhood, his background was... his family were paan-growers²⁹⁵, the paan that we eat. We were from the *barai*²⁹⁶ community. My father's family had a three-storey house in Nagpur²⁹⁷ in the central area behind the Tata Parsi School²⁹⁸. It was considered a great thing. But I never felt like going there because there was no cultural environment in their house. I used to miss my maternal grandparents very much. I remember one incident from my father's childhood — I feel this was the beginning of feminist thought in me and the basis of the strong feelings I had on domestic violence against women. My father's mother was very beautiful and since they were trading in paan she used to sell paan from home. She had died after being beaten very badly by my grandfather. It was the day of Vat Savitri²⁹⁹ and she had been fasting for three days, she was an extremely hard working woman. She used to cook for everybody and only because of his suspicious nature and anger he beat her up. My grandmother's mother-in-law tried to save her. But she died even before she completed her three days' fast. This incident made a lasting impression on my mind and at the age of eleven my father became an orphan. And he was orphaned when he was thrown out of the house. (...) And my grandfather got married again. He was brought up in other people's houses. When my mother came into his life there was a dramatic change for she brought along a different vision and her own way of looking at things, she had her own hobbies. They were really poor when they got married. They did not have any money. Grandfather had not given them anything. But my mother used to do stitching and knitting to make some money. Only when my father got a

²⁹⁴ This interview was conducted over several days. The symbol indicates a break in the interview.

²⁹⁵ An after-dinner chew, generally made of nuts, candies and various spices, wrapped in a betel leaf.

²⁹⁶ A subcaste, included in the legal grouping "other backward castes," for which special legal provisions (analogous to "affirmative action") were made.

²⁹⁷ A city of over 2 million residents located in the middle of India, state of Maharashtra.

²⁹⁸ Jamshedji Nusserwanji Tata Parsi Girl's High School was founded in 1920 by J.N. Tata (1839-1904), a Parsi (Zoroastrian), who accumulated a fortune from many enterprises and endowed many educational and charitable institutions in India.

²⁹⁹ A ritual conducted by a married woman for the longevity of her husband's life.

job in the bank, our economic condition improved. I was around seven at that time...my younger siblings did not experience this kind of poverty. But I have experienced poverty when we didn't even have food to eat. (...)

Aruna: You told us many wonderful things about your mother and the environment at home. Also at a later stage you took a strong stand against caste discrimination. This must have started somewhere in your childhood, will you tell us something about that, some incidents or some images which reflect the situation during your growing years...

Lata P.M.: Nagpur is known as the bastion of R.S.S.³⁰⁰ and they have an entire office in Nagpur. Hedgewar³⁰¹ and Gowalkar³⁰² guruji also stayed there. All the families around us were associated with the R.S.S. Even the school I used to go was R.S.S. oriented. If we didn't wear a bindi³⁰³, we were pinched on the forehead. In my childhood I wanted to work with them and I joined the Rashtriya Sevika Samiti. But gradually I realised that whenever my mother was invited for a meal or for any haldi-kumkum³⁰⁴ ceremony.

Aruna: For any programme...

Lata P.M.: Haldi kumkum is a women's get-together; they put tikas on one another's foreheads.

Aruna: Give flowers...

Lata P.M.: And there is a ceremony of godh bhara³⁰⁵ — they would never do it to my mother. (...) Mother would tell me that this is the way it has been, this has been the tradition. But I realised that this is the way upper caste people behave with the lower caste. There was a feeling that we should aspire to become like them, they are our ideals. I always heard them talking about me as an ideal, in my neighbourhood. I had one or two friends who always got less marks. I would even get prizes in many other competitions like in elocution competition, essay competition and book reviews. Their parents would tell them that even though I was from a lower caste, I was doing so much, which they could not although they were from upper caste.

Aruna: You were bringing awards...

Lata P.M.: And they could not even do this much...so this used to hurt me a lot. They were not taking into account my calibre even though it was very much there. This was very difficult for me. And boys were told that even though I was a girl I could do it, which they couldn't despite being boys. I would think about all this comparison from both sides. The good thing was that I

³⁰⁰ R.S.S. = Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh ("National self-reliance union") a Hindu fundamentalist and right-wing nationalist group, was founded in Nagpur in 1925.

³⁰¹ Keshav Baliram Hedgewar (1889-1940), a doctor and pioneer in Hindu fundamentalism, who founded R.S.S.

³⁰² Madhav Sadashiv Glowalkar (1906-1973) took over the leadership of R.S.S. after Hedgewar and was also one of the pioneers in Hindu fundamentalism.

³⁰³ Bindi ("dot"; also called tikka): A dot, made of power applied on the forehead. It often indicates that a woman is married; however, it is also worn by girls and even men in some parts of India.

³⁰⁴ A get-together of women.

³⁰⁵ A ceremony conducted by married women for fertility.

understood this, because otherwise I would have never been able to become a feminist fighting against casteism, communalism³⁰⁶ and even gender bias.

Aruna: Discrimination between men and women...

Lata: I could not have become a feminist. Whenever I experienced any caste discrimination in school I spoke about it at home. Regarding intercaste marriage, their views were quite regressive. They felt that it should not take place. They were of the opinion that it was all right up to a point like if a boy from the Mahad³⁰⁷ community ate at our house or even a girl — there should be no caste discrimination. Then my parents introduced me to Mahatma Phule, and we also started getting some very good magazines at home like *Manoos*, brought out by Mazgaonkar.

Aruna: From Pune...

Lata: And later even the books related to Soviet culture started coming. So gradually the time when I was in my ninth and tenth standard was spent reading these. Before this my reading used to be very R.S.S. oriented like I had already finished reading *Mrutyunjay*, *Swami*-- the entire works of Shivaji Sawant, Ranjit Desai, Shreena Pendse. I'd started reading all this, very little of Shreena Pendse but more of authors like Ghoni Dandekar. A great influence was of Vi Sa Khandekar and his socialist views.

Aruna: Humanism...

Lata: Humanism and he has also written on caste discrimination; all this was happening very gradually but I had also read a few stories of Anna Bhau Sathe. But I also noticed that whenever any girl in our neighbourhood eloped with any boy, my parents' sympathies were always with the upper caste family and they used to say that such marriages between upper caste and lower caste should not take place. (...) The best thing was all the teachers whom I met, were all very open minded and unprejudiced.

Aruna: They were progressive.

Lata: Non-prejudiced. They had a very liberal attitude — some were from the Sarvodaya³⁰⁸ movement, and I met some Gandhians also. At that time the grand daughter-in-law of Gopal Ganesh Agarkar used to teach us. Political Science wasn't my subject but she came after college hours. I was very active in extra curricular activities; so I shared a very good relationship with her.

Aruna: At that time you used to run a magazine?

Lata: I used to bring out a magazine called *Deepkali* and I was the editor. (...)

³⁰⁶ In India “communalism” usually refers to prejudice, discrimination, and conflict between different communities (religions, caste groupings). The Gujarat riots of 2002 were an example of communalism.

³⁰⁷ Mahad: A community belonging to a lower caste in the Hindu caste system.

³⁰⁸ A movement by followers of Gandhi, after Indian independence in 1947, to bring self-determination and equality to the disadvantaged groups in India. The word was coined by Gandhian disciple Vinobha Bhave.

Aruna: You were telling us about being introduced to liberal beliefs after you did B.A. when you went to another college. How did these beliefs get stabilised during your M.A.? Could you tell us something about this?

Lata: 1975 was the International Women's Year and at that time in Binzani College³⁰⁹ I met Gail Omvedt³¹⁰ and all these other people. I heard Gail Omvedt and other people and at that time I did not know anything...

Aruna: That you would go in that direction...

Lata: Yes, that I will go in that direction but I felt very good. Women from all over the country had been called, all prominent women, it was the beginning, it was Gail's beginning too. None of her books had come out, she was not known, it was just the beginning. There were many other people and I remember that at that time even Rupa and Seema were not in the picture — Rupa Kulkarni and Seema Sakhare who are well known in Nagpur. There were many women who were M.L.A.s³¹¹ in Congress. At that time Congress was in power and all the women who were members in the Rajyasabha³¹² had come there. I came to know them and I got the opportunity to arrange this event, as I was a student in the college. (...)

Aruna: At that time you were in B.A. or M.A.

Lata: I was in B.A. and they told us about Tarun Shanti Sena³¹³ under the leadership of Jayaprakash Narayan³¹⁴ and I heard about class struggle for the first time. And then there were many issues and they told us that Jayaprakashji³¹⁵ spoke about a total revolution and this movement is seven-folded; it has seven dimensions like education, women, etc. I felt very happy women, caste, education and labour were not neglected. It combined all social questions, and also class struggle. I understood it later after reading. After '78 I got interested. After listening to Shubhmurti I decided to join the J.P. (Jaya Prakash Narayan) movement. (...) And I can never forget the Gandhi maidan³¹⁶ meeting, lakhs³¹⁷ of people had come after the death of J.P. and at that time I came to know what youth leadership was, that we were the leaders. After coming to

³⁰⁹ Binzani Women's College, Nagpur.

³¹⁰ Gail Omvedt (1941-), a scholar-activist and author of several books, who works with various social movements and organizations in India, particularly those involving women and farmer. She was born and educated in the U.S., but became a citizen of India in 1982.

³¹¹ M.L.A. = Member of the Legislative Assembly, the state legislative bodies in India.

³¹² The upper house of the Indian Parliament.

³¹³ Youth Peace Camp. In these work-study summer camps, youth worked on local projects such as road building. They also studies the conditions leading to their projects as well as broader history of the site in which they were working.

³¹⁴ A political leader in the Indian independence movement of the 1930s and 1940s and later a leader of the Praja Socialist Party. In the 1950s he drew away from politics to work on a program to distribute land to Harijans (Untouchables), but emerged in the late 1970s to oppose Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's imposition of a "national emergency" with his "total revolution" movement.

³¹⁵ In India, the "-ji" suffix is used to indicate respect and admiration; e.g., "Gandhiji" for Gandhi.

³¹⁶ Maidan = A large open space or park, often in the middle of a city, used for informal socializing and also for events, speeches, and public meetings.

³¹⁷ One lakh = 100,000; 100 lakhs = 1 crore (10,000,000).

Nagpur I decided that although I will do my M.A. my aim will be to do work for the society. And after coming I started work in the Shivajinagar slum. In between my B.A. and M.A. I joined a journalism course. I experienced a different kind of atmosphere there also. (...) For the first time I saw a cosmopolitan atmosphere and my entire vision changed. It was no longer restricted to only the J.P. movement or the movement or even just feminism, so I was exposed to many other things during my journalism course. (...)

Aruna: So this was the atmosphere around you, you were part of different organisations and different programmes. How did you meet your life partner Ravi and decide to marry?

Lata: We met each other in an elocution competition, we used to see each other in various competitions and debates which were held at the inter collegiate level and at that time all these were very popular and at that time Ravi used to feel that I use a highly decorative language and use a lot of superlatives, that I exaggerate things. He had a different style. We competed with each other a great deal. The first time we met was when Acharya Rammurti³¹⁸ had come and his discourse was arranged. I spoke there, and Ravi was very impressed. He said, "So far I've heard you only in elocution competitions and not giving a speech and you speak very well." At that time I thought he was from the opposition group and he didn't mean it. (...) Gradually we became friends. There was a conference in Patna then and live-in relationships were very much talked about. Ravi felt that we need not marry but can declare our relationship and live together. (...) I thought this was a very delicate matter, a very complicated matter also and at that time I did not agree to this and said that we won't make this announcement here. (...) When we decided to get married we went to tell my parents. And then when we went to meet my mother Ravi bent down and touched her feet. He used to come to our house on his birthday. So my mother asked him why he was doing this for everybody knew his birthday. When we told her we wanted to get married; she got very angry and said nothing. She was knitting something, she kept on knitting, said nothing and became very stubborn and then my father came home at night. By then Ravi had left. Then my maternal grandmother was called for from Delhi. My Nani hit me a lot and asked me how I can go against the community. At that time I realised that caste system was not only a discrimination between higher caste and lower caste but each caste brought along its own customs and rituals and these are followed by a very rigid and strong system and they don't want to disrupt it. Every community has been taught not to compromise in principles and it is great in its own context and that one should get married within one's own community. (...) They vehemently opposed our marriage and moreover Ravi had leucoderma spots³¹⁹ and they had objections due to this also. I'd told Ravi that they may oppose. Despite so much of progress people are still misinformed about this. (...) Then we felt that many supported us, only a few people didn't. Then I planned my strategy; only my parents opposed it telling me how the community and our relatives will react. So I started telling my neighbours when I would get married. Our landlord, his small children, even they could have leaked it out but I started telling everyone that I was going to get married on 27th March. Even my sisters knew; only my younger brothers didn't because they could have told my parents. I had even written to my uncle who had brought up my father saying that I am marrying Ravi and I think that everyone must bless me because I am doing nothing wrong. And everybody around us knew that we were getting married

³¹⁸ A disciple of Gandhi.

³¹⁹ Small white patches that develop on the skin, due to loss of melanin pigment. While the causes are not fully understood, the condition is neither infectious nor contagious. Also known as vitiligo.

except my parents. My aunt knew about it, my aunt's children knew about it, all our relatives knew about it. I wondered why my parents were so scared. Before our marriage Ravi's father had come to my aunt's house and he had seen me. He was quiet by nature, he accepted it but there was a lot of opposition in his family. His mother was very much against an inter-caste marriage. (...) The day I was going to get married I was leaving for college at seven in the morning and I met my father on the road. He asked me where I was going and felt like crying because I was lying. I told him that I was going to college. We got married and we came to Wardha.³²⁰ I was not wearing a mangalsutra³²¹ — actually Ravi didn't put a mangalsutra on me. It was a registered marriage. We had decided that there will be no marriage symbols for both of us. My sister-in-law told me to wear the mangalsutra because I was going to my in-laws and if I wanted to compromise with my mother-in-law then I would have to wear it. I wasn't wearing tikka so I had to wear tikka and mangalsutra, only then I could go there. (...) The night I went to my in-laws a journey began for me. It is only then I realised that getting married was not a very easy thing. As I entered I saw an angry and tense environment, no one was talking to one another. My sister-in-law was an engineer she was a professor in VJTI³²². She taught electrical engineering, her husband was in Air India then. In spite of that — my mother-in-law was a headmistress — yet they gave me a very rude welcome. There were a lot of utensils to be washed; I drew water from the well and washed them. No one spoke to me. They gave me food but they were so angry that even the sweet rice they had prepared for the occasion was totally burnt. They gave me bhakri³²³ and milk; I am from Nagpur and I'm used to eating pungent food. I had never had bhakri and milk ever and I just couldn't eat it. From that day my mother-in-law viewed me differently. My plate was kept separate. I was served separately, they ate separately; then I realised I'd no status in that house. Ravi told me that we will adjust, and that I will change the environment in the house. I didn't know that this was the beginning of my war, my jihad; the onus of changing the atmosphere of the house was entirely on me. (...) So on the second day we decided that we will go to Mumbai³²⁴ and we came to the station, my aunt and one of my friends came with us. Anil and my aunt asked us go home. My mother-in-law and the others said, you are going now and we'll meet when we meet. They didn't speak to me, my sister-in-law said bye, so did the younger nephews. We came home. My parents were no more angry. As soon as they saw us from the terrace they came down and opened the gate of the house and my father removed the gold chain from his neck and put it around Ravi's neck and said that we accept you as our son-in-law and I have forgotten all my anger. (...)

Aruna: We were talking about all the changes a woman goes through during marriage. What were the problems you faced and how did you cope with it?

Lata: Firstly when we were getting married, we were going to start our life together. Many couldn't attend our marriage; we made a very beautiful card for them. When I give that card to SPARROW you'll see two beautiful birds who have set up a nest, a little world of their own, with freedom for both. This is what we had thought our life would be like. (...) From the moment I stepped in that house in Mumbai, in Goregaon, in Bangur Nagar,³²⁵ a very nice flat,

³²⁰ A city and district near Nagpur.

³²¹ A neck ornament indicating the married status of a woman.

³²² VJTI: Veermata Jeejabai Technical Institute.

³²³ A round, flat unleavened bread.

³²⁴ Also known as Bombay, the metropolis of over 13 million people on the west coast of India.

³²⁵ A middle-class residential suburb of Mumbai.

they had two separate flats, one for my sister-in-law and the other for us, and in such a place from the very first day my food was kept separately. I was served separately; they would not eat the food I cooked. Then we were there for one and a half months. But they never ate what I prepared. (...) After that we came to Wardha and started our own life, I was very happy for the two years we spent there exactly the way it had been before marriage. (...) Ravi was a scientist in Wardha; he was doing some project on biogas and solar energy. We had a different relationship with environment and even my work in the slum areas was going on. I was doing lecturership in Nagpur, going to and fro. Even after all this I was very happy because whichever case — the Chanda Chaudiya³²⁶ death happened then. We were campaigning for that and many other things. But as soon as I came to Mumbai all my activities were restricted. We got married in '80, in '82 I became pregnant with Manu. In the seventh month Ravi got a job in Mumbai. From that time we started having tussles between us because Ravi felt that, as he was the only son, he should look after his parents. And I said that you can look after them no matter where you live. (...) At that time in 1983 I started my work and I want to tell you about an incident through which many of us came to know one another. That there was an organisation like Forum Against Oppression of Women³²⁷ in Mumbai, has made all my work so far possible. At that time Manu was six months old and a seven year old girl was raped in Goregaon. I was upset with this case and I felt that I must go to the morcha³⁷ and express my solidarity and for me it was like a need to breathe. I felt that if I didn't, I won't be able to live. I went for that morcha when I came back my mother-in-law's blood pressure had gone up. My husband and my sister-in-law were sitting near her. Even my sister-in-law had come along with me to the morcha but she was not talking to me. Nobody was talking to me and I was totally boycotted. Everybody told me I need not have gone right then. Even Ravi said that I could have gone later, there was no hurry for me to go for social work, at that point. (...) I felt that it was very important for me to get out or else I would feel suffocated and would also feel suppressed from within. At that time I went to S.N.D.T. and met Neera Desai³²⁸. After looking at my certificates she told me that I could join from the next day and I joined immediately. I got an opportunity to do research on the portrayal of women in the 19th Century Marathi³²⁹ periodicals. This incident happened then. I had to catch the 8:45 local and before that had to finish cooking and other work. I didn't keep Manu in the creche³³⁰, I kept her with her grandparents. Only then my mother-in-law would think that kadhi³³¹ should be prepared or some other vegetable should be prepared. I faced many difficulties and Ravi used to help me in the morning and leave. Lot of importance was given to his job. If his first lecture was at 8.30 he should leave by 7.30 to reach on time but even if my muster was at ten there was no understanding that I too had to reach on time. One day I was almost nearing a nervous breakdown and I became very violent and I told her that will I leave this house and not stay here anymore. (...) This was the reason why I decided that I must leave the house. (...) Ravi and I decided to leave the house and in '82 when Manu was about a year

³²⁶ Chanda Chaudiya case: A dowry death case in the area of Vidarbha in Maharashtra, which was taken up by the Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini.

³²⁷ A women's rights organization.

³⁷ Protest.

³²⁸ See Global Feminisms (India) interview with Neera Desai.

³²⁹ Marathi is the Hindi-related language spoken in the west-central Indian state of Maharashtra, of which Mumbai is the capital.

³³⁰ Day nursery.

³³¹ A soup-like dish made with chickpea flour, yogurt and other ingredients. Often served with dumplings.

old, in December we left home and started living in a small place in Bhandup³³² as paying guests.

Aruna: Lata, you came from Nagpur to Mumbai and after your marriage you went through all this trauma and decided to set up your home separately, but you always felt within you that you should continue with the kind of work you were doing in Nagpur. So how did you link yourself with the various movements and organisations in Mumbai?

Lata: One thing was that I had been in touch with all the activists of Sangharsh Vahini³³³. Staying with Raziya and Shrikant, who were activists, meant a constant interaction. And another thing was I had been going to Nari Atyachar Virodhi Manch³³⁴. Although I had stopped going in between I had already built a rapport with them. So gradually I decided to attend the Friday meetings of Nari Atyachar Virodhi Manch. At that time Manu was very young, she was just about a year old. When I was working in S.N.D.T.³³⁵ there was a Women's Studies conference in Trivandrum.³³⁶ Everyone was really worried about how I could leave her and attend the conference because I was not staying with my in-laws. Everyone said I can't leave her like that. Only Ravi and the people at the creche were going to be there. At that time I was nursing her and I would have suffered too. I was told about so many hurdles but I had decided to go to the Trivandrum conference. It was not only a matter of change for me but also because I wanted to do more work in Women's Studies and so I went for the conference. (...) I forgot to tell you about my involvement with theatre from the time I was in school at Wardha, Nagpur and so I felt that I should do something similar here. Then I decided to talk to people, although there was no time to do professional theatre I felt that we must at least do street theatre and so I associated myself with Nav Nirman Sanskritik Manch.³³⁷ (...) I decided that I will not just have an academic career but be a full time activist. Although it was a full time job at Women's Centre, it was a campaign group. (...) And they were taking up many cases. I met all of you in the Women's Centre, you all were working there. Nirmala Sathe was there, Flavia³³⁸, Ammu Abraham, Jessica Jacob, Susie Mathai, Lalita Das, Leela Nanjiyani, Naina Mehta. All of them became my friends. Vibhuti used to come often. Sonal, Swati, Chayanika and the entire of the Forum used to come. I have seen Forum having separate meetings but the entire group was still together and had created very good campaigns. I remember the one campaign, before section 498A³³⁹ came up. There was a campaign before 498A amendment to not only include domestic violence but also legal redressal for harassment within seven years of marriage. In this campaign organisations like Women's Centre, Saheli, Jagori and many other organisations working around the country with support centres contributed. (...) My experience in Women's Centre was very happy because there were a lot of creative activities there. Many women came with their own

³³² A residential-industrial suburb of Mumbai.

³³³ Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini ("Student and Youth Struggle Force"), established by Jaraprakash Narayan as the youth wing of his "total revolution" movement.

³³⁴ Nari Atyachar Virodhi Manch: Forum Against Oppression of Women.

³³⁵ Shreemati Nathibai Damodar Thackersey Indian Women's University in Mumbai, popularly known as SNDT Women's University.

³³⁶ A city of 900,000 people, near the southern tip of India, also known as Thiruvananthapuram.

³³⁷ Nav Nirman Sanskritik Manch: A theatre group.

³³⁸ See Global Feminims (India) interview with Flavia Agnes.

³³⁹ (IPC) Section 498A - Section 498A of the Indian Penal Code (added in 1983), which defines the offense of matrimonial cruelty.

personal experiences. We started collecting them when we were at the old place at Vakola.³⁴⁰ Then we worked day and night and wrote, *Twelve Women, Twelve Households*, an experiment in collective thinking and writing. I could always write but my greatest contributions were the songs, which came easily to me. Some songs were written by me and Nirmala and some were written by me and we had included some seven cases of Women's Centre. Seven of us-- actually twelve of us — were working on it. We raised twelve questions from seven cases. Twelve different questions on twelve issues related to Christian women, Muslim women, tribal women, educated women, housewives, working women and sexual harassment at workplace. Thus we took up the cases that came to us and the ones we did counselling for, the ones we used to talk to and the ones we were fighting for in the courts. (...) My 'Kala Suraj' play was put up at C.U. Shah College of Pharmacy in S.N.D.T. But what I really liked was that all Ravi's students started telling me to write and give them something. Initially I did not even take an honorarium. The first two times I wrote free of charge. But I had written 'Kala Suraj' because, I don't know the exact history of theatre but I felt nothing was written about women and war. (...) There was discussion on how war affects women. What is her identity after the war, what is her nationality, which is her country? She has neither caste nor religion. We considered that at least she had a motherland, a nation. But my play raised the question for the first time if a woman really has a country she can call her own. This brought about a lot of discussion. (...) What gave me most happiness was the play we did with 200 children. We were all with Women's Centre and in Chayanika's house on the terrace all the girls of Forum Against Oppression and at that time there was Forum against Sex Determination and Sex Selection, we will talk about it later. I wrote a play with 200 child actors then at *Arti Rege's* house and *Madhushree Dutta* directed it. Four of us along with 200 children did the street play at *Hutatma Chowk*. Till today no one has been able to do it with 200 children. Neither the group of Matkari, nor anyone has performed this kind of play³⁴¹. At that time there were *adivasi*³⁴² children, convent children – we had brought all of them together and improvised with groups of fifty, synchronising the songs, play and action in a street play. (...)

Aruna: Lata, today we see that you have taken part in various movements. Tell us something about the various issues you raised in the movement. Sometimes you participated directly, sometimes you used other creative methods to put forth your views. Let's talk about this. So can you tell us a little about amniocentesis?

Lata: Yes, the first thing is that women's movement has never been only issue-based. But different issues have come up at different times similarly this issue of amniocentesis, later Net En³⁴³ and Depo Provera³⁴⁴, I spoke about, we started talking about these issues. (...) The name was Forum Against Sex Determination and Pre-Selection³⁴⁵ and many of us were working in it. Harpal, Prita, Chayanika, Swatija, Kamakshi, myself, Ravi, Raghav, Mohan Deshpande, Aruna

³⁴⁰ A densely-populated suburb of Mumbai, near the airport.

³⁴¹ Ratnakar Matkari is a famous Marathi author born in 1938. His writing spans many forms, although he is perhaps most famous for his plays. His plays, some of which were geared toward children, generally dealt with social issues.

³⁴² Literally, "original inhabitants," a term used for indigenous (before the Aryan conquest-settlement) peoples of India. In the 19th Century, many converted to Christianity.

³⁴³ Norethisterone enanthate, an injectable progestogen.

³⁴⁴ A controversial synthetic progesterone contraceptive injection that lasts for 12 weeks.

³⁴⁵ A group opposed to the use of sex-determination of a fetus in order to select the sex of the child by aborting the fetus if it is female.

Deshpande all of us took the lead. Aruna came occasionally but Mohan came regularly. We made beautiful posters sitting on the roads. I remember we sat on the roads of Vile Parle³⁴⁶ and began making posters. Many other people came and joined us. Around the same time Ravi's book was published by CED³⁴⁷. From Ravi's research we came to know that the proportion in the birth statistics in Maharashtra and Chandigarh was 900 per 1000.³⁴⁸ But even today after all the campaigning it is only 922 per 1000 which means that there is a continuous drop in the number of girls. Sex determination was banned first in Maharashtra due to our campaign. But maximum numbers of sex determination centres are here, in secrecy, even today. The interesting thing in this campaign was Meena Menon and Women and Media group also played a very active role in this. They went to the various centres with a tape recorder pretending to be pregnant and asking for an abortion. Even Sanskriti did a very good job, going with the camera to centres advertising along the railway tracks promising a boy child and inviting people to consult them. Ravi, Mohan, Raghav, Harpal, Sanjeev Kulkarni, and others began looking for such quacks and similar people who claimed that they can bring about the births of only sons. The campaign focussed on not only amniocentesis but also on our customs. In this country people do rituals praying for a boy but there is no such thing for a girl. We do kanyadan,³⁴⁹ gift away girls in marriage. But for boys we do ritual prayers. So to initiate some thought on this issue Ravi published the book *The Scarcer Half*. This book caused a great stir. We took this campaign even to schools. (...) Manaswani had given a slogan, which became very famous - *Amhi muli sada phuli nahi phunknar chuli*: We girls are ones forever blooming, not ones blowing into stoves. Then we made an album with Junuka's sketches. I remember at Kala Ghoda chowk³⁵⁰ all the feminist women of Mumbai coming with their spouses and children and there was a big march of girls and that was when I wrote the play I told you about, with 200 children, which was directed by Madhushree. And I remember Health Secretary D.T. Joseph had come over there and immediately after that he took out a G.R.³⁵¹ that clinics conducting sex determination tests should be closed. This was the first G.R. of its kind. (...)

Aruna: Lata you were telling us about various types of protest; I remember you had written a song on injectible contraceptives and it had become very famous. Will you sing it for us? (...)

Lata: A needle has come into the hospital, Sister, Sometimes they call it Net En and sometimes Depo Provera/ Big countries have laid this trap./ Yes, laid a trap. Laid a trap and made us prisoners. They consider the Third World toys of clay./ A needle has come into the hospital, Sister.

Lata: It's about the Third World women being used as guinea pigs. The women's movement has constantly spoken about it. From the beginning it has talked about it.

Aruna: From the beginning it has talked about it.

³⁴⁶ A suburb of Mumbai.

³⁴⁷ Centre for Education and Development.

³⁴⁸ That is, 900 girl babies per 1000 boy babies.

³⁴⁹ Literally, "gift of a virgin"; a conception of marriage as a gift from the bride's father to the husband.

³⁵⁰ Area of the central business and cultural district of Mumbai.

³⁵¹ Government Resolution.

Lata: Yes, be it sex determination test or *Net En* or *Depo Provera*, I remember *Maria Mies*³⁵² came here and began talking about all this but we had already spoken about all this, and the campaign included these issues. (...)

Aruna: Lata, through the feminist movement we have raised and had to raise the very important issue of communalism. And you were very active in this movement. Tell us how the movement differentiated between casteism and communalism.

Lata: Firstly, the women's movement included women from all caste and class. There was collective leadership, the most important aspect of the movement was that it didn't belong to any one group. When we talk about the movement we have to take everybody's names. Not just of one individual or any single leadership. Secondly, women from different religions came to the movement. Questions relating to being women and women from a particular religion, both were handled by the movement. For example, there are personal laws based on religion, there are also separate laws for the adivasis and other communities. Apart from that, if a woman is a dalit,³⁵³ and she has been attacked or if she is a dalit and has been raped or if she is raped and attacked because she is a Muslim or like Bhanwari Devi³⁵⁴ being raped for being a lower caste woman and teaching Rajputs – this kind of communalism reflected in women's lives, the movement has always opposed. If you see, from 1975 we have always taken a stand on this issue. (...) This work has its drawbacks but it was necessary to work consistently against the forces, which brought women under the sway of communalism. We have to work a lot against it and I feel there was a period of despondency but now women have again risen against communalism and we are all in this together, even you. Those who worked in Behrampada, and Shama, Madhushree, Flavia and others have worked a lot to create a strong resistance but I still feel that we've been unable to control the power of communalism.

Aruna: You have gone on morchas for the movement but simultaneously you also did research. Your research in S.N.D.T was on portrayal of women in the 19th century Marathi journals. It was called *Yug Pravartan Ke Sakshidar*, (Witness to Changes in History). Tell us something about it?

Lata: Actually when I started this work with the Research Centre, it was only a bibliography project but I realised that I was handling a lot of important material, which would become merely bibliographical documentation. Its importance will not be realised. (...) I was identifying rare references and I worked in the Mumbai Marathi Granth Sanghralaya.³⁵⁵ I found that many references were not available there. I had prepared a list of journals edited by women. But only two issues of *Abala Mitra* – were there. Even issues of *Kesari* and *Sudharak* were not many. I consulted issues of *Kesari* in Pune.³⁵⁶ (...)

³⁵² A Marxist-feminist sociologist who worked for many years in India. She is known for her theory of capitalist-patriarchy.

³⁵³ The current preferred term of those formerly called "untouchables" or (by Gandhi) "harijans" (children of god). The Sanskrit-derived term means "suppressed."

³⁵⁴ Bhanwari Devi: A rural woman trained as a social worker who taught young village girls in Rajasthan. The upper caste people opposed this and consequently she was brutally gang raped as a punishment by the upper caste men.

³⁵⁵ Mumbai Marathi Granth Sanghralaya: A library in Mumbai.

³⁵⁶ A city of about 4,500,000 million, 110 miles southeast of Mumbai.

I chose *Vividha Gyan Vistar* and *Marathi Gyan Prasarak* and also *Manoranjan* because Kashi Raghunath Mitra had started it and many women wrote in it. There were many articles of Kashibai Kanetkar who was the first woman writer to write essays. They are mentioned in her books. But even in Marathi literature her work is not mentioned. And while working on this bibliography I came to know about women like Manakbai Lad who was one of the first women to edit journals and she is not mentioned anywhere. (...) I noticed that all these women were from the upper caste. But there were also educated women from the lower caste who were also writing but there was no reference to them. So I looked for more writing, then from the dalit and other communities.

Aruna: After this you started researching another subject, which was related to this subject. You were studying the role of dalit women and women from minority communities in the feminist movement. Tell us something about the questions you started this research with.

Lata: While doing this work I joined the Women's Centre and at the same time there was a lot of discussion going on in R.C.W.S.³⁵⁷ about participatory research. It was just the beginning of participatory research and oral history. I was doing research at Vile Parle, Neeraben had given me the work of preparing a documentary. So I was doing a research in the Parle slums. I used to go the Parle slums and interview women and at that time I felt what these women spoke was something very important that no one will know. Alice Thorner and Neeraben had conducted a research and made a documentary about the role of women from slums. They had done this as apart of Women and Development. At that time I felt that these women had done so much of work but what was the position given to them in the movement. Upper caste, middle class women are seen as leaders but these women can't be seen anywhere. She could be from a slum in Parle, or from Akola, or someone like Sayabai from Dhakali, what is the position of these women? (...) At that time there was a lot of focus on Phulwantabai Jhodge in Neelam's work. Stree Mukti Sampark Samiti³⁵⁸ decided to celebrate Savitribai Phule's anniversary. We decided to celebrate it in big way on 3rd March [January] at Savitribai's school³⁵⁹ in Bhidewada. Only then we met a woman called Phulwantabai who had been working there for many years. She had also been working for the Satyashodak Samaj³⁶⁰ and nobody knew about her work. She had kept alive the work of women in Satyashodak. She was recognised then. But there was nothing written about her or Vimlatai Bagal or Nalini Ladke. Actually my research had been done much earlier, but only later Urmila and Meenakshi's book came out. (...) Today Zingubai is very active among the dalit and other backward castes in her community. She is very active in the Panchayati Raj movement³⁶¹ and there are many women like her who were at that time behind the curtain and were victims of silence. The names of many such women are here. (...) [Daughter Manu has joined Aruna and Lata at this point.]

³⁵⁷ R.C.W.S.: Research Centre for Womens' Studies.

³⁵⁸ Stree Mukti Sampark Samiti: Co-ordination Committee for Women's Liberation Movement.

³⁵⁹ India's first school for girls, founded in 1848, in Pune. Sadvi Savitribai Phule was India's first woman teacher.

³⁶⁰ "Truth-finding community," started by Savitribai Phule and her husband, to help liberate lower casts from oppression.

³⁶¹ Panchayat Raj movement: A Indian political movement to devolve power to elected village councils.

Aruna: Lata, creativity is a very important part of you, it is seen in your writings. Like in your stories, poems, verses and essays. We would like to know about them. I feel your creativity began with your writings and as you told us about your mother who could make even small and ordinary things beautiful, similarly about creativity that is reflected in your writings. Tell us something about that.

Lata: Regarding writing I feel that it has always been my medium. Whenever anything happened to me even in my childhood, poetry came to my rescue. Then they were not so refined. I don't even know if they could be considered poetry. When I published them they seemed very flowery. I did not even know if what I felt from within could be called poetry. When I started writing seriously — I had written a lot before my marriage and two or three stories and some poems had been published. I also wrote essays and verses. And at the same time I was doing journalism. I was a reporter in *Nagpur Patrika* and along with all this I felt that I should write or else I won't survive. (...)

Aruna: A source of inspiration for your creativity has been your daughter Manu. You wrote thousands of lullabies sitting along with her and sang them as well.

Lata: I was about to come to that. They are unpublished. No one knows that I wrote those lullabies. My poems are known because they have been published. Stories have been recognised. People know even about my songs but no one knows about the lullabies. She would want a new lullaby everyday. Even now when she comes home very tired, the way we relax is by singing songs. (...)

Aruna: Sing for us...

[Manu and Lata sing together.]

*A drop of rain the sunlight brought
In seconds rose a fragrance from the earth of my mind
It came running like a rising wave
Was it rising in the ocean
Or was it in my heart
A drop of rain the sunlight brought
In seconds rose a fragrance from the earth of my mind
Tir kit tir kit dha
Dance my feet
On the road to the village
with eyes on the sky*

Aruna: Feminism is not bound by national borders. When we were working in Women's Centre you were a full timer. You got a chance then to visit other countries and exchange views. You had gone to Lahore.³⁶² Tell us something about that?

³⁶² City of 6,000,000 people in Pakistan; before the 1947 partition it was in India.

Lata: I had always been very creative and so whenever there was any creative workshop, everyone used to say that Lata should represent Women's Centre.

Aruna: In workshops...

Lata: We went to such workshops and it was a good opportunity. Even before this there was CENDIT³⁶³ in Delhi where participants from South Asian countries were going to meet and I got an opportunity to learn video shooting over there. And even film making. And at that time I made friends with many women from other countries like Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nepal. And when Farida from Pakistan went back, they had an organisation called Simorgh³⁶⁴ — they had a workshop on women and media and she invited me and I went on behalf of Women's Centre for that workshop. This workshop was specially for artists who were going to learn screen-printing and poster making and writing songs and stories. We did not know who else we would meet over there. I already knew Farida, and there I met Lala Rukh and Neelam. I knew Farida but I came to know many others like Shaheen. I came to know them very well. (...) I remember we took a pledge that one day we will go to all national borders. Women from either side of the borders will meet at the borders and bring down all those wires, lines and fences and there will be no boundaries for women. So this was a dream that we shared. (...)

Aruna: I remember there was workshop on leadership training in New Jersey in America. You had participated there on behalf of Women's Centre.

Lata: They sent an invitation to all the organisations in India and had asked for the biodata of all the participants and from these they selected some. They had selected 20 women from 20 countries for a workshop on New Leadership for Women in Rutgers University in New Jersey and 50 applications were sent from India. Women's Centre sent my application and I was selected from among these fifty women from India.

Aruna: You were there for three weeks...

Lata: Yes, it was almost a month. The workshop was for three weeks and after that we visited different places. And I stayed on for some more days and around the same time the International Conference on Women and Health was going on in Washington and I participated in it. I went to Boston and Chicago and visited all the rape crisis centres and battered women's homes, which are shelters. I visited various places like this and they also arranged for me to give talks. (...)

Aruna: Lata, while being very active in the women's movement, you came to a turning point with many questions on your mind and while looking for answers you got involved in the environmental movement and you joined the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA).³⁶⁵ What were the changes you felt within yourself, tell us something about it.

³⁶³ CENDIT: Centre for the Development of Instructional Technology.

³⁶⁴ A Women's Resource and Publication Centre in Lahore, Pakistan.

³⁶⁵ "Save Narmada [River] Movement," an organization opposed to the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam (and others dams), which is being built on the Narmada River in the norwestern India state of Gujarat. The project will displace more than 150,000 people, most of them rural poor.

Lata: I came to a turning point in my work with Women's Centre. I had just come back from America and immediately began counselling and many other things were going on then. There was a case of a Muslim woman by the name of Wahida Kulkarni, which became a turning point. By that time I had already been counselling for seven years and it is a very terrible experience for anyone because one is looking at burnt ward cases and one is experiencing so much of violence and at the same time you have a feeling that you are unable to bring about a change in the system. I had started from a very progressive movement like the Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini, which was about total revolution. So I began feeling that I was getting cut off from the grassroots. We felt that we were working in a very superficial way and fighting legal battles and campaigning for legal rights could not be called people's movement because people were unable to participate directly. People's movements were happening in various places then. On one side were the people's movements on land rights and resettlement issues. On the other side the women's movement was talking about a new kind of humanity. And on the third side groups like CPDR,³⁶⁶ PUCL³⁶⁷ were raising the issue of human rights and that movement was also there. But slowly issue-based movements began which were not only talking about displacement and resettlement but also raised other questions. Like the movements for the right to information, right to work and the right to life. The right to life movement had three important demands. The rights on land, water, and environment.

Aruna: Water, land, jungle.

Lata: The whole environment. I began to feel closer to all the environmental movements. I observed that the developed countries were destroying the natural resources of the third world countries. And they were unconcerned. Not that there were no protests. The fight to save our natural resources began at various levels, like the Chipko movement.³⁶⁸ We consider Chipko movement to be a part of women's movement but the movement in itself is quite a big thing. I wondered what could be done along this line. Medha's name was coming up quite often and then she was working in Maharashtra. Even earlier, I was at the Women's Centre, when Medha and Arundhati had their first *dharna* in Mumbai we had gone from Women's Centre to help them. (...)

Aruna: You had gone in support of the Narmada Bachao Andolan.

Lata: To support. To decide what all the supporters could contribute. Some could contribute food, some could give economic help, some could go live in the valleys, some could join as full-timers. We were invited for this reason. I had gone to that meeting. I remember we were all sitting on the terrace of BNHS (Bombay Natural History Society) where the meeting was held. After the meeting suddenly they told me that Medha was asking for me. Medha said, "I'm making you an offer as you are not presently with Nari Kendra." I had taken a break then. "Will you work with us and will you co-ordinate our activities in the whole of Mumbai?" It was a good opportunity for me and I was also looking for something like this and I had suddenly got the opportunity to do this work. (...) The people for whom I was fighting were involved in this. Like

³⁶⁶ CPDR: Committee for the Protection of Democratic Rights.

³⁶⁷ PUCL: People's Union for Civil Liberties.

³⁶⁸ An organised resistance, spread throughout India, to the destruction of forests.

the displaced people needed to be resettled and this concerned adivasis, dalits, and other backward castes and women were the majority. Many issues were present in it. The Narmada Bachao Andolan was there to question such developmental policies. It is generally said that the Narmada Bachao Andolan or the Chilika movement³⁶⁹ or the Silent Valley movement³⁷⁰ of Kerala are issue based. But these movements created an awareness about developmental policies. Till today development was understood as progress. Big dams, big buildings, big projects and big plans. It was not very easy to work against these big projects because big powers were involved like the World Bank and WTO. IMF was giving monetary fund. Global powers were behind these projects and the fight was against them. We were not only fighting at home but were also fighting the world. This was the picture. It wasn't very easy, for *if an adivasi fought in the Narmada valley the impact was felt by the President of the World Bank*³⁷¹. This was difficult for the common man to understand. But this was happening. To me it seemed very important to reject the development perspectives and propose an alternative policy and initiate discussion on it. (...)

Aruna: Lata, you said that Narmada Bachao Andolan is not just opposing big dams but is presenting an alternative perspective...

Lata: Why were the big dams opposed for even that was part of alternative development. What are the things that a big dam destroys? Whatever great progress has been spoken about is actually endangering the environment. The studies on flora and fauna have proved that they destroy even the smallest thing that preserves the environment like for example hilsa, which is a river fish and considered endangered — its death is certain. Then there are so many issues related to land, for new land cannot be created. Building a big dam means displacement of many people. Where will they live? They will move to big cities, metropolitan cities and slums will increase. Slums are increasing because people have been displaced. But people say people have come and made slums and so there is more garbage. But this is not so. All these are all interlinked. It is the development policy that decides who should be displaced and where they will go. They will go to big cities to provide cheap and bonded labour, they'll work and they will die. There will be no commitment for them; this is the structure of the entire model. The third thing is that like land, they have created an enormous myth about water that we have water and if we make a reservoir people will have more water. But a reservoir in 50 years. There is a very nice song in the Narmada Bachao Andolan that says — a promise of fifty years and a bet of several lakhs. Lakhs will be destroyed, lakhs will lose land. In Narmada 1.5 lakh hectare land³⁷² will go under water, under the dam. Then they said that 1.5 lakh hectare of land is going to be cultivated. Nobody has ever seen statistics this way. They are drowning already irrigated land. And they say that 1.5 lakh hectare land will be cultivated and not that the same amount will go under the dam. It's like reaching your mouth the other way. This is not a solution; after destroying you talk of creating something out of it. This is not the way to development. Development is something, which

³⁶⁹ Save the Chilika movement, a successful resistance movement, started by fishermen around the Chilika lake in Orissa in the early 1990s, against a project of intensive prawn cultivation and export which was a direct threat to their livelihood.

³⁷⁰ Opposed the construction of a dam for a hydroelectric project in Silent Valley, a dense rainforest in the south Indian state of Kerala.

³⁷¹ The controversy over the Narmada River dam project led the World Bank in 1993 to withdraw from financing the project.

³⁷² About 371,000 acres or 580 square miles.

allows whatever is growing, flowering, bearing fruits to continue. Let its seeds spread and grow again. This is the natural process of growth and this kind of development is breaking this cycle. (...)

Aruna: Could you tell us a little about *jal samarpan*³⁷³?

Lata: If no one leaves, no dam will be built. That has been the role taken up by N.B.A. The decision to stay and not move out was taken by the adivasis themselves and not the people who came to the movement from big cities including Medha herself who was leading the movement. The adivasis took the decision to stay there and not let the dam be built.

Aruna: Which year was this?

Lata: The movement started in 1985 with this announcement. And all this happened in '87, '88 and when I joined in 1992 there was an announcement of *jal samarpan* in 1992.

Aruna: I remember that there was a meeting in Mumbai in Dadar³⁷⁴ to support this organised by the Nirbhay Bano Andolan³⁷⁵ and the Shiv Sena³⁷⁶ people tried to break that meeting.

Lata: At that time this was a big thing and Narasimha Rao was the Prime Minister then. They had decided to increase the height of the dam and then Medha gave a call for *jal samarpan*. It created a big wave in the media and people said *jal samarpan* meant suicide and how such a decision could be taken and began calling the group a suicide squad. It was a very difficult task to manage the whole thing. At one end one had to keep track of the people working in the valley and then coordinate the activities in Mumbai. At that time some were managing the movement in Bhopal and some in Delhi. What was unique about the movement was that we were all in the coordinating committee and all of us were in the core group. We knew about the internal decisions and once we came out we did our own individual work. And each one has to manage a fort; it was a kind of warfare but a nonviolent warfare.

Aruna: You can't call it a war

Lata: Yes, it was not confrontational war but it was a kind of an answer we were giving them in a peaceful way. (...) There were also attempts to break the meeting at Dadar. I remember it was the 6th of August and *jal samarpan* was to be on the 7th and *jal samarpan* could happen anytime on the 7th. Sixth was a very critical day and our hearts were beating very fast.

Aruna: There was a lot of stress, a lot of mental stress.

³⁷³ "Sacrifice in water," or remaining motionless in the face of incoming waters, unto death, as a protest.

³⁷⁴ A suburb of Mumbai.

³⁷⁵ "Do not be afraid movement," organized in Mumbai, to give education and legal assistance to poor and marginalized people regarding their rights.

³⁷⁶ "Army of Shiva" [the Hindu god of destruction], a right-wing Indian political party centered in Mumbai. It has been accused of using violence; e.g., attacking movie theatres in Mumbai to get the film "Fire" withdrawn, and vandalizing a cricket pitch in Delhi to stop the Pakistani cricket team from playing there.

Lata: There was lot of stress. I remember the meeting was in Vanmali Hall and it was so full that people were standing all the way to Chabildas Hall. They wanted to know what was going to happen next and the entire responsibility was on me.

Aruna: I was there in the meeting.

Lata: I gave a lot of details in my speech, which even today people tell me was unforgettable. I appealed to everyone saying why this *jal samarpan*. Not to commit suicide but because there is a limit to any *satyagraha*³⁷⁷ and this satyagraha had reached its limit. (...) Medha was supported by all strata, by all progressive and like-minded people. That day I came across as a woman who was a witness, a participant and a leader in the struggle. (...)

Aruna: Narmada Bachao Andolan raised many important issues involving the environment about which you have mentioned earlier. You also told us about the various struggles and campaigns you organised. But I feel that there is also another important aspect of the movement and that was the National Alliance of People's Movement (NAPM), which is still active. You played a very important role in it. Tell us something about it.

Lata: It is very important that I tell you about the entire process, how it evolved. Many supporting groups joined the movement and there was constant networking. The movement's own coordinating group that is, the core group, also had many people. (...) There were fifty-fifty votes in NBA whether NAPM should be formed or not. Those who supported Medha including me, had thought about NAPM and supported it. They felt that there should be some work at the general level also. So far we had only spoken about networking with people's movements. It was necessary to take political initiative in that direction. A big role in this was played by National Fish Workers Forum, Azadi Bachao Andolan³⁷⁸, NBA, Samajwadi Jan Parishad³⁷⁹, Chilika Bachao Andolan of Orissa, Chennayyaji's Peasant³⁸⁰ and Dalit Movement of Andhra, they joined the Peasant movement and Dalit movement and started a movement, then Pennurimai Iyakkam³⁸¹ of Tamilnadu — with Gabrielle Dietrich³⁸² — that organised people living on footpaths, many such movements joined it. I cannot name all of them because there were so many. We decided to choose one issue to fight for and decided that the alliance will be the first *manch* of its kind to also fight globalisation and show its solidarity. This manch was set up in Sevagram and it is now eight years since NAPM was established.

Aruna: In 1996...

Lata: It was in 1996, so it is eight years — in 2006 it will be 10 years. It started in Sevagram. The first issue we decided to fight in NAPM was the Enron issue. (...) NAPM was an alliance where the active members were elected. Based on votes, there were eleven national conveners

³⁷⁷ "Truth force," a term originally used by Gandhi to describe his nonviolent protest movement.

³⁷⁸ A national movement in India to counter the influence of foreign multinational corporations and western culture,

³⁷⁹ "Socialist People's Association," an Indian political party dedicated to Gandhian socialism.

³⁸⁰ Chennayyaji's Peasant movement – Peasant Movement in the south Indian state of Andhra Pradesh.

³⁸¹ Pennurimai Iyakkam - A women's rights movement in Chennai [formerly Madras], in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

³⁸² A feminist scholar who has been writing and working in Madurai (a city in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu) on women's issues.

and one amongst them was chosen as the national co-ordinator, then a co-ordinator. I was chosen repeatedly for two years as the national convener. These elections were held every two years, so I was a National Convener for four years.

Aruna: That must have been a very big responsibility.

Lata: Yes, it was a very big responsibility. (...) I feel that with the networking I had done with other groups and organisations in Mumbai – in the four years of my tenure as Convener in NAPM, the best thing was that I was able to develop a special relationship with the local groups in Mumbai. The important fact I understood was that globalisation did not affect only the middle class but the common people whose jobs were threatened and what their fate was to be. (...) I remember, the hopeful thing was that we could fight against globalisation. Along with it was a rising hope that we could make a new world. It was the beginning of the making of a new world and I feel proud that I was a part of it.

Aruna: Lata, you were just now talking about the NAPM. I feel that when one is in the movement one suffers a lot of mental stress, and it also gets reflected in one's personal life. I feel that you should talk about this also.

Lata: There have been situations in my life when I felt that it wasn't easy. I am talking about a time in which I was totally immersed in activism but I am not just an activist, I am a mother, a wife and I am related to many and I am also a human being I have my expectations and I have my responsibilities as a mother and I have a personal life of my own. It happens with many who come into public life that their personal life gets affected. And I have been told many times that because I'm a full time activist —even in the women's movement I had a leadership role. I gave it up and came back to grassroot level work and I rose to leadership position in NAPM. But I have always been an activist and also a writer. However, people have always seen me as an activist. They say that I desire to be a leader. When I could not spend time with Manu, my male colleagues were not very sensitive about this. In NBA despite men and women working together, not those in the core group, but others in Mumbai always told me, you want to become Medha Patkar³⁸³; you are very ambitious and that's why you are sacrificing Manu. Whenever I had an important responsibility they used to say this. And I'd feel very hurt and cry on reaching home. Ravi and Manu used to reassure me and tell me not to take these things to heart because they didn't feel this way. (...) I always felt that the foundation of our life together has been very strong. There was a lot of sharing, even in housework but the economic decisions were always taken by Ravi. (...) Although it's a matter of our family and Ravi does have the responsibility, but Ravi failed to notice many things. I've been very hurt for whenever I wanted to spend I had to ask Ravi. (...) At this time, till the journey to Enron, my work kept increasing. So did my thyroid problem. I didn't know that tension is linked to the secretion of thyroxine. I started getting attacks of depression and I had a nervous breakdown. Many don't talk about all this openly but I wish to talk, specially in an oral history like this so that even after 50 years if someone were to listen to this, at least a psychiatrist, it could be noted that a woman doesn't go through all this because of some hysteria or because there is something the matter with her

³⁸³ Indian social activist who led opposition to the Sardar Sarovar dam project. With other activists, she later founded the National Alliance of People's Movements, which opposes globalisation and "corporatisation."

stomach or because of some organic disease. It is very important to find out the reasons behind such problems. (...) Today I am surprised that this film is being made on me because the names mentioned like Mahasweta Devi or Veena Mazumdar or Neera Desai³⁸⁴ — I am counted as an activist among them. This gives me recognition and I really don't know how to thank for I've always been denied recognition. (...) You will see that whatever photos I have I am always in a mob. You must have seen Anand Patwardhan's *Narmada Diary* film. When they took Medha away everyone was there. Anand Phadke and others were witnesses.

Aruna: When they were force feeding...

Lata: Yes, when they were force feeding. I was present there at that time and in a leading role. But in Anand's film I'm nowhere; I'm there only for half a second in Hutatma Chowk. This has happened not only with me but with many full timers despite second rank leadership positions. This is why they broke down. I feel that the strong NBA leadership was broken down because of lack of recognition. (...) I feel that this has not been written in anybody's autobiography and I am narrating this personal account. Women don't write because...only Usha Dange has written — she was Comrade Dange's³⁸⁵ wife. She has written that she had many nervous breakdowns but even she hasn't written the complete story. She has written in her autobiography that people have even called her a mad woman. As the wife of a Trade Union leader, she took care of them, fed them and did other things; but she always felt economically deprived. (...) A lot has been written about male activists. Regarding women full-timers, there is a notion that her husband will provide for her. And we cannot talk about our economic tensions. It's true that Ranade who may visit me is even more deprived. At least, I have a shelter but people like him have lost their houses. So how can I sit and cry about my own problems? My sorrow can't be expressed even within the movement. And where'll I go? I'll have to establish myself, economic esteem, and become somebody. (...) I have an M.A., I have done research in an university. So I have at least some options but what about the person who has given up his or her entire career and has not studied beyond the 12th standard for the sake of the movement? Today that boy is drinking heavily because there is nothing and he is in deep depression and no one bothers about him. A boy like *Sunil Bodke* is today completely depressed because he believes there will definitely be a revolution but how can we bring it about with *so much saffronisation*³⁸⁶ and other things? And parents say, first you earn and then you talk about all this. He can't speak until he earns. Until he earns he has no place in the house. What will people who have given away their entire lives to such movements do? (...) Today I can see that none of the movements have full timers. We say that NGOs have taken over but no one has thought about the personal lives of these full-timers — about their wives, about their husbands, if they are women, about their children. I feel it is very important to think about all this. I have written a poem about Gujarat and I write a column in *Mahanagar* but I feel my creativity, on which we spoke so much, is spent out. After that I couldn't think of a story, couldn't write a poem, no words come to me. I feel that creative fiction, which comes from within, for which you don't need reference books, has died within me. I'll read the poem.

³⁸⁴ See Global Feminisms (India) interviews with all three.

³⁸⁵ Comrade Shripad Amrit Dange was a leader of the Communist Party of India, a committed revolutionary and dedicated leader who played a major role in shaping India's trade union movement.

³⁸⁶ Movement to infuse Indian society, especially education, with Hindu ideology and values.

*Truly, I can't find any words
 Someone has openly assaulted my poem in Gujarat
 A walled city has entombed so many Anarkalis³⁸⁷
 In the open,
 Stripping them of their pajamas and salwars³⁸⁸
 They have seen their religion that once resided in their hearts
 In the open,
 Stripping them of their pajamas and salwars
 They have seen their religion that once resided in their hearts
 No one has bound my hand and foot
 But my young daughter clinging to my knees
 Sometimes becomes the cover for my cowardice
 There is nothing I can do to save my poem
 I can surmount those walls and reach that city
 Now even train compartments become empty on the way to that city
 But the arriving train, with some bundles and some babies,
 Some women, some men, and some old
 Comes crammed to capacity
 I have not seen anyone carrying the Koran or the Bible
 Has anyone seen Hindus with their holy books while travelling?
 Amidst their anointing, sacred threads and auspicious timings,
 Amidst rubble, stands a crowned Ram
 Amidst their anointing, sacred threads and auspicious timings,
 Amidst rubble, stands a crowned Ram
 Ram no longer symbolises the ideal state
 Ram has just remained the Ram
 With the tendency to suspect
 And put to test Sita's character
 I have only one request
 If you find in my poem
 Any word of mine, do inform me
 It's possible some temple builders
 May have razed it, mistaking it for a masjid³⁸⁹
 It's possible some temple builders
 May have razed it, mistaking it for a masjid
 Or it's possible that in Godhra³⁹⁰
 It may have been violated
 But my poem was neutral
 Beyond religion, race and caste
 Pronouncing it pseudo-secular*

³⁸⁷ Anarkali was a courtesan in the court of the Moghul (Muslim) Emperor Akbar who ruled India. His son Salim fell in love with her. The emperor disapproved of this relationship and punished both of them. Anarkali was buried alive. Here Lata refers to young girls who lost their lives during the Gujarat communal riots.

³⁸⁸ Loose trousers that, with a kameez (shirt), are a form of traditional dress for women in some parts of India.

³⁸⁹ Mosque.

³⁹⁰ Gujarat city; site of a 2002 attack on a train carrying Hindu activists that precipitated intense anti-Muslim violence in that state.

*Someone may have browbeaten the word
It has probably gone underground
Like an activist
Hope my poem has not inherited my disposition
To verbalize, to raise its voice,
Hope it is not afraid
Poem, if you have gone to adorn, like henna,
The palms of those helping at the relief camps
Or to console a child looking for its mother
Or if you can take away that blindfold
And tip the scales in favour of truth
Or on seeing a burning tyre encircling somebody's neck
You have rushed to help that person
If you find it meaningless to mark
The religion of a child from any womb
If you become the strength that wards off swords
Then Oh Poem, I do not regret your loss
But what I do lament is
You, who accompanied me to my conventions and conferences,
Where are you lost?
Truly, I can't find any words.*

Aruna: Lata, you spoke about your feelings, about the moments when we feel absolutely lonely. But I feel that with your activism and other qualities there is flow in your life. Why don't you read a poem, which talks about this aspect of your life?

Lata: I will read the poem where I am talking about this flow in which I have asked the river to reassure me. I feel that even other activists must be feeling the way I do. It is true that life is like a flowing river. I am reading a few portions from a long poem. They will not seem like broken fragments for each portion is a poem by itself.

*River, our acquaintance is very old
You met me during childhood,
Then you caressed my cheeks,
And moved ahead rapidly
Holding my wee finger, my mother dragged me away
But I could not overcome the temptation to touch you
River, I met you at my maternal uncle's village
Where my mother's face radiated calm composure
As she approached the temple with offerings for my uncle's wedding
Mother and aunt sat by your banks
Conversing in leisurely soft tones
While I stared fixedly, enchanted by your beauty
As I stepped into your blue waters, topped with white foam
You offered me a seashell smooth
Which I preserved ever after (...)*

*River! For some days you and I were one entity
As if I were you; tumultuous, tempestuous
Unstoppable, flirting with the banks, free
Your exultant cry, and my warbling
There was not much to choose between the two
Your alluring elasticity had me enamoured
And I lost all sense of self
Sometimes simple, sometimes playful, sometimes unrestrained, sometimes calm
When my mother mentions my marriage
My passion I hide
And like you, I wail, but inwardly
Tell me oh river, amidst this torrent
Is there a way to measure tears? (...)
River! The seeds burgeoning within me
Like a field replete, spread through the settlement
River! Now this flood won't abate
And now you are so inseparable
The seashells, pearls and hidden treasures in you
I do not wish to lose
Our relationship, like a new shoot
Like a cataract, rapid
It's true, the flood won't abate now!*

The End

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS:
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: INDIA

**Transcript of Mangai
Interviewer: C.S. Lakshmi**

Location: Chennai, Tamilnadu, India

Date: 10-11 March, 2003

Language of Interview: Tamil



SPARROW

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Mangai is the pseudonym of Padma (born in 1959) who is a theatre director and a Professor of English Literature in Stella Mary's College, Chennai. As a member of the All India Democratic Women's Association and Chennai Kalai Kuzhu, Mangai actively took up several issues relating to women and presented them in the form of street theatre and stage plays. Later she became the key person in a theatre group called *Voicing Silence* that is being supported by the M.S. Swaminathan Research Centre. This group has scripted and enacted a range of issues from female infanticide to recasting women characters from epics. Mangai has scripted and participated in some of the plays and has directed some of the plays presented by the Voicing Silence group. Her Tamil plays raise many issues on gender, theatre and language that belong to debates within feminism.

C.S. Lakshmi (the interviewer) is a researcher in Women's Studies and a Tamil writer who writes under the pseudonym Ambai. She is currently the Director of SPARROW (Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women).

Mangai Transcript

Mangai: I lived with my grandparents in Nagapatnam³⁹¹. Actually we were a big family. We were seven of us — three daughters and four sons. My mother was a single daughter so my grandparents were interested in taking care of us. The first three of us - my eldest brother (my *akka*), my sister and myself — three of us grew up and we were with grandparents. Now my parents lived in Chennai. We were in Nagapatnam. It was my grandmother who used to take me to all the temples, listen to *Kathakalatchepam*, *Harikatha*³⁹² anything that comes there. And my grandfather was a school headmaster, highly ambitious and bent on settling us big, in our lives. So he made us all write this merit scholarship exam and I passed it when I was in fifth standard and I had to join a residential school for that. So they put me in Besant Theosophical High School. That was in Adyar then, where the KFI (J. Krishna Murthy Foundation School) school is now. The hostel was in Thiruvanmiyur. So that was in... situated, within Kalakshetra campus. So right from my sixth standard to my eleventh standard, I was in Kalakshetra³⁹³. Kalakshetra, you know, gave us a great exposure. I don't remember enjoying many things but then we had to be there for all the arts festivals. Rukmini Devi³⁹⁴ was alive then. And, you know generally the ambience was great. Every Friday, we were taken in a big procession to the Thiruvanmiyur Temple to do *bhajans*.³⁹⁵ So you generally kind of kept listening to music and he also tried putting me in a dance class. That's like an hour and a half in the evening for three days in a week. The problem is I only learnt to do my *Aramandi*³⁹⁶. By that time, I think, I failed in my English exam in my seventh standard. So my mother said, "Put a full stop to dance. It's because of dance that you didn't score well in exams." You know, that was the connection. So she stopped me from dance. (...) Actually, my parents, both of them, I don't think they showed any interest even in watching any performances. Not even as much as my grandmother was interested in watching any of them. But my mom was interested in reading. I mean I still think that her interest in reading is something that I actually cherish today. (...) While in college I met Arasu³⁹⁷. Arasu was then a PG (Postgraduate) student and I was a UG (Undergraduate) student and we kept meeting in college meets and all that. And he was also not really particularly interested in performance but he would come you know, even in college plays. Whenever I acted he always made it a point to be there and later, actually I remember when we came to Madras, I used to make him accompany - you know take him with me to concerts, to see Bharatnatyam³⁹⁸ dances and all that. (...) But then, he was very much interested in the traditional forms. Because he is a student of Tamil literature, he was very keen on the way...it's very literary in quality, the flexibility of the forms. And he was also from another community. So ours was an inter-caste marriage. So it's like a clean break from my family. So I usually say that after my '20s, it's absolutely with Arasu. In fact, I would say that is the only home I keep. Because I never really stayed with my parents ... till ten years and that was too young. And that was with

³⁹¹ Coastal town in the eastern part of the state of Tamilnadu.

³⁹² *Kathakalatchepam*, *Harikatha*: Traditional Puranic and epic stories told with music.

³⁹³ Elite international dance school in Madras.

³⁹⁴ Member of theosophical society and a classical dancer who was a Brahmin who made this kind of dancing socially acceptable.

³⁹⁵ Hymns.

³⁹⁶ *Aramandi*: The half standing position with knees bent and feet facing opposite directions in Bharatnatyam (Indian classical dance).

³⁹⁷ Mangai's husband who is a non-Brahmin professor of Tamil at Madras University.

³⁹⁸ Traditional classical Indian dance.

my grandparents and then with Arasu. Of course, I have two children now a daughter and a son. And my daughter joined me in my group with *Pachcha Mannu*³⁹⁹. She was in eighth standard. And she was actually a kind of a stand-by performer. (...)

Lakshmi: Mangai, in contemporary Tamil theatre, you are a very important person; you are a name to be reckoned with and you have written some very interesting articles on Tamil theatre. I think it would be interesting if you could tell us in general about what theatre in traditional Tamil culture has been? That would help us to understand your own work in the context in which you have been working.

Mangai: Actually it's such a vast area and I think when we refer to something as theatre - unlike in the West, where ballet is different, opera is different and theatre is something more modern with a lot of prose in it or dialogues in it or whatever. In our case, I think - that's the case with most Asian cultures also, at least South Asian, we can be very confident - the whole of India and in Tamilnadu, all these are mixed. So, you have pure dance forms like *Devarattam* or *Oyilattam* or *Thapattam*, whatever. We also have narrative forms like *Villupattu*, it's a balladeering kind of thing. There's a lot of singing but there's no dance. And then there is what we can call total theatre — like it can be *Therukoothu* in Tamilnadu, it can be *Yakshagana* in Karnataka or *Jatra*⁴⁰⁰ in Bengal, you know, all over the places, we can identify. Now I think all these forms have very different projections of women - by its absence basically. (...) And I think, actually in the theatre form, I don't know about *Yakshagana* but then *Koothu*⁴⁰¹ — even now I think *Koothu* is essentially a male domain. It's the male members who will play all the roles including the female roles, you know in the turn of the century, say 19th century end and 20th century beginning, where you had Parsi theatre influence and we started having regular drama, what you can call as musical dramas, with a scene, set and all that. You started having women. But interestingly, the *Chandramati*⁴⁰² will be done by a woman. But then, there will be a clown, no? They call them clown, actually. Clown will have a *jodi*, somebody to partner with him and these are dancers. And that dancer will be a male dressed as a female. So when it is a very dignified kind of character, it is okay for a woman. Only recently I think we have also started having female dancers. And most people who are in the profession, they don't want to do the dancer's bit. They would prefer a character role. So essentially I think theatre has been an area which is, you know, which is happy if women don't enter and meddle with it. That's the feeling I always keep getting, as a form. The genre itself resists you if you are a woman.

Lakshmi: Mangai, what about women as viewers? Did they have the space and time to be viewers of this theatre?

Mangai: I think right from ancient times, there has always been restrictions. Not just in our theatre, perhaps even in the Greek theatre space. At least for us, I think, we know, because

³⁹⁹ “Fresh soil” is a play that Mangai did to raise awareness about female infanticide.

⁴⁰⁰ *Therukoothu*, *Yakshagana* and *Jatra*: Folk theatre forms of dance that were adopted by the leftist activists to interpret political issues. These dance forms were used in contrast to the traditional classical Bharatnatyan dance form.

⁴⁰¹ Abbreviated use of *Therukoothu*. The *Koothu* is a folk form of dance drama adopted by the leftist activists to interpret relevant issues. This dance form was used which is in contrast to the traditional classical Bharatnatyan dance form.

⁴⁰² *Chandramati*: *Chandramati* is the main female character in the *Puranic* story *Harishchandra* and *Chandramati*.

*Arthashastra*⁴⁰³, our age-old treatise tells us that, “If you go for this show with permission there is a fine and without permission there is a separate fine.” (...) If we can come to our own times, we know, when we had these touring theatres, where they come and camp outside the village and have shows, there was always specific areas allotted for women. So you know, ‘women-only’ spaces. (...) So, that made us form not only all-female groups as part of the women’s movement but also stage plays at different times. (...) So what we usually did if we wanted to really cater to the working women’s group, we went to their work place. So almost all major offices have a lunch space. Or as they have their lunch, that break, that was our time for performance. You know just like how they have these gate meetings, we performed I guess. Or, if it is going to be this slum clearance, you know where you have those slums in any housing board locality and all that. We had to choose a time in between the lunch break and before the children come. (...) I still remember in ’96 when we went to do *Pachcha Mannu*. In most places, the idea of a woman coming to watch something, you know, it’s something that is not the done thing. So I still remember, there will be men. There will be children first and then of course the men will be standing somewhere at a distance and they will come in only after you have finished your entry song or whatever. In one place they said *Ninga pannunga, nanga poi sollarom*: “you perform, we will go and tell them what you did.” So they did not want the women to come and watch. So we had to really make that effort to get the women to watch our performances. But I know I am very concerned about it, you know, just like how you say you want to have more women on stage, I think we also want to reach out to more women audiences. (...)

Lakshmi: Mangai there has been a very strong Dravidian Movement⁴⁰⁴ in Tamilnadu. And it has nurtured theatre in a particular way and with specific perspective about women. Can you tell us something about that?

Mangai: I think it’s a very new heritage that Dravidian Movement; actually, it built it within the existing tradition. When I say existing tradition it’s not those traditions with dance, music and all that. It’s the other kind of tradition, which Pammal SambandaMudaliar⁴⁰⁵ started. Pammal was a lawyer and he worked in Chennai and he started this concept of an urban-based theatre, where you have a play running for about three hours or so meant for a city audience kind of thing. Now, he did introduce a little bit of prose into whatever he tried. He tried to translate Shakespeare and all that, as all of us know. But that prose was not really the everyday prose. And I think what the Dravidian Movement did in its place, not just in place - actually I think I would say the Dravidian Movement has given birth to a completely new genre which has its own aesthetics called oratory. (...)

Excerpt from “Voicing Silences”

Group of actors: *Praise to the Mother Goddess! Hail Mother, thou Creator of the World!
The world bows at your feet!*

Actor: People of the Muthunayakapatti village, we come from Chennai!

⁴⁰³ This treatise on government is said to have been written by the prime minister of India's first great emperor, *Chandragupta Maurya* (250 BCE).

⁴⁰⁴ First Civil Rights movement of “backward” castes.

⁴⁰⁵ Lawyer and playwright who was a founding member of the Dravidian Movement.

We belong to the theatre group “Voicing Silence”
Shortly we will perform the play “Pahha Mannu” in this marketplace. “Pachha Mannu.”
We invite all of you to stay and watch our performance.

Actor: Silence! Silence! Silence!

Mangai: We, of the Voicing Silence, have come from Chennai.
People from disparate backgrounds have come together to form this group.
Please feel free to intervene during the performance with your ideas and opinions.
It will be of great help to us.
Voicing Silence presents “Pachha Mannu.”

*Group of actors to actress: Is it a boy? Or is it a girl? It is a boy! Glory be!
Boy or girl? Alas, it's a girl...worthless!
How sad! A girl!*

Male actor to actress: Why are you so upset? Did I drive you out of the house? Or threaten to take another wife? You know how difficult it is to bring up a child, especially a girl. Think of all the expenses! So, do the sex determination test.

Actress: Let us have the child, we'll see later.

Male actor: And what if it is a girl?

Actress: Then...we'll kill our newborn. I'll do it myself.

Lakshmi: Mangai, you've been telling us about the characterisation of women in plays, in the past. Some women-oriented plays have been written by men, isn't it? Can you tell us something about these plays?

Mangai: Actually in Tamil, I think even character plays are very limited. You know, usually, they are all chorus plays and invariably chorus means men. You know, it's easier to have a group of men performing the chorus. Of the very few plays which have protagonists as women, I think the first reference should be made of Ramanujan's⁴⁰⁶ *Veriattam*⁴⁰⁷ – it's an adaptation of *Trojan Women* and I think early '80s – I'm not very sure. But in that, I think we actually had a very strong voice of women against war and all that. Of course, quite weepy and the whole play is set in an *oppari* – *oppari* is those funeral songs that we sing. What I remember very distinctly, because you know I can only talk about the '90s with more confidence. '95 – Sangeet Natak Academy⁴⁰⁸ – they had this whole series of helping out the young directors. And then there was this comment that there are no new playwrights coming up. So they started this young playwrights programme. So we were asked to submit and all that and they chose, I think, three texts. Of the three texts which were chosen from Tamil, two of them had female protagonists. One is Malaichami's *Muni* (Evil spirit). The other one is Devi Bharati. Devi Bharati's

⁴⁰⁶ Modern early playwright, professor of Tamil at the National School of Drama.

⁴⁰⁷ Dance when possessed as in the case with Kali dancing the final dance.

⁴⁰⁸ National Academy of Music and Theater. It bestows awards and sponsors events related to the arts.

Moondravathu Vila Elumbum Vizuthukalatra Alamaramum (The Third Rib and the Banyan Tree With No Aerial Roots⁴⁰⁹). (...) And then, around the same time, we also had an NSD (National School of Drama) drama workshop. And Professor Ramanujan was the course director of the whole thing. He staged *Sempavalak Kali*⁴¹⁰ (TRANSLATION). And I know that's a theme which has been in his mind for long. So I think these three plays, which came sometime around '95 towards the end – September, October – kind of had...this whole space was provided for women, I should say. And that really set me thinking you know, about what are they trying to characterise? First of all, all three are based on some kind of a myth. *Muni* is based on a local deity down south, *Sempavalak Kali* is again a kind of a mythical story based on two women who were actually *dasis*⁴¹¹ and then *Moondravathu Vila Elumbum Vizuthukalatra Alamaramum*, Devi Bharati's text is based on, what do you call them... oracle kind of thing? You know, you have a kind of, there is this banyan tree which doesn't have those aerial roots or whatever and it is supposed to predict whenever a new child is born in that village, it is supposed to predict. So once again it has something to do with, you know, orality, whatever that is, that little tradition that they talk about, which I found very interesting. (...) Malaichami's *Muni* was directed by Mu. Ramaswamy. Mu. Ramaswamy, is I think, one of our major directors, very sensitive to the stage space. He had already adapted *Antigone*. You know Shenbagam Ramaswamy⁴¹², she adapted it as a text and he directed it. It was called *Durgaravalam*⁴¹³ (...) He took Malaichami's *Muni*.

I think on stage, it was a very, very powerful presentation, in the sense this is about this little deity, who has been - this as usual like all kings - this Thopilana Raja also has his way with women. So he just takes any woman whom he finds interesting. And he takes this woman and after he has her, he usually brings them as maidservants. And this young woman, young virgin girl, curses him that he will always have still born children. So this wife, this queen mother, she keeps on bearing children and the children keep dying because of this curse and Thopilana Raja suffers. And that is how *muni* takes her revenge. So that's the whole story. (...) What I remember distinctly is that last scene where this young maid who is actually a deity who has got that – who has given a curse to this king, she takes her revenge. You know, she actually sits on the man like that (shows) and she has to do that. Now we had two *munis* in the course of the play. One is played by Jeeva (Jeeva is a theatre researcher and a director and an actor in her own right from Pondicherry School of Drama), and Palani. Palani, again, is very well versed in *Koothu* and all that. Now both of them played the *muni*'s role. When they played it right from the beginning as a young girl, you know, teasingly erotic and all those things, it didn't really matter. When it came to the last bit, on stage you have this Arjuna *tapas*⁴¹⁴ – that huge stick – I think you must know, it is taken from *Koothu* where you have this big palm... palmyra tree and it has these small steps. So as Arjuna goes up the *tapas*, he is supposed to sing a song to Lord Shiva⁴¹⁵ in each step. Now this was the structure, which was the centre stage, which to me was symbolic of the erect male order. And this Raja is there; he is lying flat, of course you can see the erection of the penis and the continuation of the Raja's thing (body). And *muni* goes and sits there on him. Now, I heard, I mean this is something offstage, I heard that when they rehearsed he kept trying out with both

⁴⁰⁹ This metaphor implies vulnerability.

⁴¹⁰ "Red Ruby Kali" – angry goddess whose face is "red as a ruby."

⁴¹¹ *Devdasis* - women dedicated to god who normally do not get married.

⁴¹² Wife of Mu. Ramaswamy. She is a leftist feminist activist.

⁴¹³ Translation of *Antigone*.

⁴¹⁴ Arjuna *tapas* : Penance of Arjuna. Arjuna is one of the major character from the epic *Mahabharata*.

⁴¹⁵ God of annihilation, the destroyer. His wife is the goddess Kali.

these people – both Palani and Jeeva. But on stage, Ramaswamy himself was doing Thopilan Raja, and Ramaswamy is by nature very shy, you know, I have been with him in a workshop with Badal Sircar and I know how he relates to a female body – which comes out of a very feudal respect for the opposite sex actually; so he decided that Palani will do this last bit. But to me that was a major statement that you are making. You would rather have a man clad in a female cloth do this vengeful role – vengeful part, rather than have a real woman, you know, on stage. And there are also other hierarchies of age, this is about *Muni*. Devi Bharati's script as such doesn't - I was all for that because it talks about this curse that befalls somebody saying that your wife would be a prostitute. So he is very scared and so he lives his life with that fear in him and then everybody in that village has some... something to wreak vengeance on: that tree. So ultimately, the whole play ends up with the tree being cut. And it was '95 and I remember Devi

Bharati saying that it was his reaction to Babri Masjid⁴¹⁶ – you know about how religion, superstition, all this builds up and it actually shows how a female discourse or discourses connected to sexuality and progeny and procreation all that actually affect and they are reified by religion and all that. So theoretically perhaps it sounds really fine and Raju directed it. Raju from Pondicherry School of Drama. Once again, a very major director, from NSD and all that. So he, when, in his play we had lot of women on stage. I mean, this is something that I think only theatre will face, you know, I mean there are times when we say, there are no women, female bodies on stage. But then here was a play where we had so many female bodies but not a single female soul – S-O-U-L (she spells). You know, I mean you never had the female voice. (...) *Sempavalak Kali* again has two *dasis*, we must realise that Ramanujan Sir is our guru, you know, it is to him that we all look up to with a lot of respect and I have directly worked with him in *Mouna Kuram*⁴¹⁷. He has directed me in *Veriattam* in one of his shows. So I still continue to relate to him with lot of awe and respect and all that. But in this, it's a very dicey argument. You know, about whether there is this *dasi* who actually likes to lead a very pure life, you know, we will put 'pure' in quotes. So there is this sage who is very curious to know what her philosophy is. And her deal is that in one night, she takes a husband, she takes a man as a husband and is loyal to him. So it so happens that when that *sanyasi*⁴¹⁸ comes, that day he dies in her house, you know. And therefore she is left with the option of either living the life of a widow or committing *sati*⁴¹⁹. And she chooses to commit *sati*, you know. And it is a very crooked way of supporting *sati* in some way, you know, and the other one is Sempavalak Kali, this god, all these are actually local myths that we have Manikkavalli... Sempavalak Kali, is again born a *dasi* but doesn't want to lead the life of a *dasi*. But then the king wouldn't allow her. I mean the king, it's traditional that she stays with him one night even if she wants to move into her business, so-called business. So, she is taken but then she tries to wreak vengeance. In the process, actually dying, she dies. But that particular part actually exposes how the king, the brahminic order, how they all actually conspire together against this one single woman. (...)

⁴¹⁶ Mosque in Delhi that was demolished by right-wing Hindu militants on December 6, 1992; massive violence between Hindus and Muslims followed all over the country.

⁴¹⁷ Translation – “Silent voices.”

⁴¹⁸ Holy person who denounces material things.

⁴¹⁹ Suicide of a widow at the time of husband's funeral.

Lakshmi: Mangai, I am curious to know how the performers, the women performers were linked to the performance itself. Actually what I want to know is was there a community of performers who acted in plays in the past, not the modern plays but the plays in history.

Mangai: Any one specific community you mean?

Lakshmi: Ya.

Mangai: No. But Ambai⁴²⁰, you know too well. I mean it's connected more with dance, you know, where we call them Isaivelalar and they have a particular tradition. As far as I know, not really, at least not now. I think that much can be safely said. (...) So I don't think that there is any one specific community. But it must have existed. Because people do talk about Dalit *Koothu* companies⁴²¹ and all that. But that's also more in Northern part of Tamilnadu. Southern part of Tamilnadu, I think communities are mixed. I mean performing community itself may be seen as a community, that's it. So I don't think it has any relationship to caste.

Lakshmi: This background of the historical participation of women in theatre, has it been recorded properly so that so many questions arise you know as to how they participated and what kind of participation they did and what were their background? Has it been recorded?

Mangai: I don't think so. I don't think there is a single documentation of when women actually started coming into theatre. For example, T.K Shanmugam⁴²² says that when they wanted to do *Avvaiyar*⁴²³, they had one woman in their company and that was Draupadi and she was five years old. And therefore he had to do the *Avvaiyar* role – the older woman's role. But you know Balamani Ammal⁴²⁴, (...) all our early film actresses are all from the theatre field, from drama but we don't have. I am also curious because K.P. Janaki⁴²⁵ who was, who died, as president of All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), Tamilnadu, comes from that family. They used to say that she had three houses in Madurai in that street where she lived. Ultimately when she died, she lived in a not even ten by ten room you know, where she had a small stove in a corner and she died like that and she, of course, lost her voice in prison⁴²⁶. We tried to document some of AIDWA leaders' histories earlier. And I still remember talking about K.P. Janakiammal, K.P. Janakiammal's involvement in *Isai natakam*⁴²⁷ and all that of which people said that she herself doesn't want to talk about it. In fact CPM (Communist Party – Marxist) has published *Amma*⁴²⁸, the title is called *Amma*. They have published her life story very vaguely talking about how she was an actress and she fell in love with this congress person who was the

⁴²⁰ Lakshmi's pen name. Ambai is a male-to-female character in *Mahabharata* (the Great Indian Epic).

⁴²¹ Dance is more caste bound whereas theatre mixes caste.

⁴²² Founder of one of India's famous early professional theatre group.

⁴²³ *Avvaiyar*: A major Tamil film based on the life of the bardic woman poet Avvai of the ancient Tamil Sangam period.

⁴²⁴ Early film actress.

⁴²⁵ Later referred to as "Janakiammal." The addition of "ammal" to the end of a woman's name is a show of respect.

⁴²⁶ Many members of the AIDWA were imprisoned by the communist party during this time.

⁴²⁷ *Isai natakam*: Musical theatre.

⁴²⁸ "Mother."

harmonist⁴²⁹ in that company and, you know, both of them were performers but once she joined the movement, she left her arts. You know, I mean even that is not really spelt out. I don't think even as women's movement... I should own it up myself, we never saw that as our heritage. But I still remember when I came in, when I came in early '80s, when I came into acting and all that, Janakiammal was always fond of people who will sing in the conferences and do some dancing and all that. (...) But, nobody talks about her involvement in the arts today. We would rather project her as a patriotic person who joined the socialist movement and all that and not talk about the art which actually brought her into this. (...) So, somewhere, I think (a) there is not enough study (b) there is not enough perspective for us to hail a heritage. (...)

Lakshmi: Mangai, there was this phenomenon called the Boys' company in Tamil theatre. Can you tell us something about it?

Mangai: I think it is just an ironic one. No, I shouldn't be saying that. This was Swamigal's, Shankardas Swamigal's⁴³⁰ venture. The last decade of the 19th century he formed these boys' companies where these children were almost adopted by the company and mainly to counter these accusations that artists are leading a very bohemian life and they are very amoral or immoral or whatever, so just to avoid that. Highly codified, militaristic kind of training, you know, that they should get up in the morning, do these work, have a singing class and then the dance class and learn their lessons. So it's supposed to have been a very - one way of tackling poverty also - because most of these young boys who were recruited into these were from very poor families. So it started in southern Tamilnadu but it actually spread to... We know that the T.K. Shanmugam⁴³¹ and all his brothers, four of them, stayed together in one company from which they separated and formed their own group later. Or I think till about the '40s, or even late '40s, we had Nawab Rajamanikkam⁴³²'s group, you know there is a huge group photograph where you have about 50 odd people who belong to that company and that's actually their home you know, not even a second home, a home where they were fed, given some clothing. All their requirements were taken care of by the Boys' Companies. But I think it was called "Boys' Companies," always used within inverted commas, but there were lots of young girls who were also recruited into that. (...)

Lakshmi: It will be nice if you could tell us something about this all-women company of Balamani Ammal.

Mangai: It's Balamani Ammal and her sister. Both of them who were proprietors of that company. Actually, I mean we don't know for sure. Even the dating is kind of very mixed up, of the records. But we know they have been performing till about early 1920s. Till then, we have references to Balamani Ammal's performances. But then they say that she died completely in absolute, abject poverty with no place to stay and all that you know, that is what we learn about them. But then it was an all-female group where *rajapart*⁴³³ was taken by Balamani Ammal herself. And you still have lot of women who take *rajapart* roles. (...) I mean. I saw that

⁴²⁹ Harmonist: person playing a musical instrument called *harmonium*.

⁴³⁰ Father of modern Tamil theatre.

⁴³¹ Famous theatre group that originally included only boys.

⁴³² Top feminist theatre group.

⁴³³ *rajapart*: Male lead roles.

happening, happen even now like three years back when I went to Pudukottai to watch. And this was Vallikalyanam (The marriage of Valli). And this woman was Valli. Jayalatha was Valli. And actually, the village head had to come and tell her *kalyanam panni vaikkanum* (marriage has to be performed). They are talking to Valli. So please oblige, you know, let the *tarkam*⁴³⁴ come to an end. Because if the *tarkam* doesn't end, the marriage will not take place. And they have arranged this and it still has a ritualistic content. So therefore I think there were these women who were... and this *tarkam* brings together, I mean we talk about intertextuality in literature as if it's a big theoretical concept but they bring in Saiva Siddha⁴³⁵ tradition – all those songs are part of their repertoire you know. No they don't keep it in the mythological time. So it's very interesting to see how they transcend time and the context of their performances bringing in all this logic about philosophy or about everyday life or about male-female...of course, they comply with the regular, feudal, patriarchal order of thinking. You can't go against it. People don't like it. In fact, Jayalatha says she started getting into *rajapart* mainly because she was excelling so much as *streepart*⁴³⁶ that *rajapart* people could not you know win her in their arguments. So the only way she could survive in theatre was to be the *rajapart* herself. So she learnt Harichandra, Muruga⁴³⁷ everything afterwards though she started off as Chandramati or Valli in special dramas, so it's amazing the way women negotiate and survive, you know, in these fields.

Lakshmi: Very interesting.... They say that special trains were run when Balamani Ammal staged a play. Is it true?

Mangai: They say that, no? Those trains were called Balamani Ammal specials. And they are supposed to reach Kumbakonam around 11 o' clock and then start again early morning at 5 o'clock. And there are people who were supposed to have travelled. (...)

Lakshmi: Actors like K.P. Sundarambal⁴³⁸, they contributed a great deal to the nationalist movement by the kind of roles and the songs they sang in the theatre. Can you tell us something about that?

Mangai: Very little, from what I have gleaned from small references that we have got. K. P. Sundarambal, especially, you know, without any formal education and she was noted mainly for her singing. And right from nine or ten-years old, she has been in these companies and she also had both *streepart* as well as *rajapart*, you know, she also donned that. And a very staunch member of not only Congress movement but also later any kind of social reform, she is supposed to have stood in the forefront. And it didn't matter what story it was. I mean all of us know about *Vallikalyanam* where Theodore Bhaskaran actually documents it in *Message Bearers*⁴³⁹ where they come singing, driving away the white storks, you know *Vellai Kokku* – or about Viswanadha Das. I mean these are all popular references. But then K.P. Sundarambal has also talked about *Khadarkodi* (The *Khadar* Flag), you know, that whole propagation on *Khadar* and

⁴³⁴ *tarkam*: Argumentative dialogues.

⁴³⁵ One of the oldest philosophical traditions in South India, influence by goddess Shiva.

⁴³⁶ *streepart*: Female lead role.

⁴³⁷ Male roles.

⁴³⁸ First woman to become a member of legislative council (“MLC”), formerly an actress.

⁴³⁹ *Message Bearers*: R.T.Bhaskaran, Message Bearers.

sale of *Khadar*⁴⁴⁰, which K. P. Sundarambal is supposed to have taken a great lead in that category. (...)

Lakshmi: Mangai, there have been playwrights in other languages whose plays have had very great impact on language theatre. I am actually referring to Vijay Tendulkar⁴⁴¹. His plays *Shanthata Court Chalu Aahe* (Silence, the court is in session), *Sakharam Binder*⁴⁴² and *Kamala*⁴⁴³ were kind of turning points in Marathi theatre. Do you think these plays which have been translated into various languages had an impact on Tamil theatre? Because these plays are women-oriented.

Mangai: Very. Very, very. Actually not *Sakharam Binder* you know, for all the power and energy that it has, we haven't yet got it in Tamil. But then, *Shanthata Court Chalu Aahe* as well as *Kamala*, both of which I think have been very powerful statements in modern Tamil theatre, both of which directed by Pariksha⁴⁴⁴ and acted by Pritam. You know I still remember Padukalam – battle field both as *Kamala* and as that middle class wife's role. In fact that's where I saw her first. These plays were very powerful on stage and I know, I still remember Gnani⁴⁴⁵ talking about the censorship problems that he had, especially when he had to stage *Kamala* and in that film chamber near that auditorium there. So those plays, yes. And most of Badal Sircar. But Badal Sircar of course nothing much to do with women but as a style and all that other Indian languages playwrights, I can't recall much of their influence as far as Tamil theatre goes.

Lakshmi: Mangai, what about playwright like Girish Karnad⁴⁴⁶ who writes in Kannada? Did his plays have any impact on the Tamil Theatre?

Mangai: Unfortunately, in the Madras-based English-theatre, [Girish] Karnad is a big name. I mean you must have known that Madras players was the first to stage *Hayavadana*⁴⁴⁷ and you know they were the first to stage *Tipu* also, *Dreams of Tipu Sultan*. So, but in Tamil we still haven't, we don't even have a translation of *Hayavadana* first of all, which I think is, no I think it's like a dream play you know that one would like to go back to. But *Nagamandala*⁴⁴⁸, we have the text translated by Pavannan. And we have also had a performance in Tirunelveli, Palayamkottai. (...) Aruna directed that play in Palayamkottai with the folklore department and all that, *Nagamandala*. (...)

⁴⁴⁰ *Khadar*: Tamil usage of hand-woven homespun rough fabric (*Khadi*) that Mahatma Gandhi popularised during the National movement.

⁴⁴¹ Marathi playwright.

⁴⁴² Translation is "bookbinder." It is a famous play by Marathi playwright Vijay Tendulkar. The play is about various dimensions of power relations between a man and two women. The lead male character is Sakhram Binder. The play has been translated in English and performed off-Broadway.

⁴⁴³ Name of the play.

⁴⁴⁴ Experimental theatre group.

⁴⁴⁵ Playwright.

⁴⁴⁶ Important playwright in Kannada (another state and language).

⁴⁴⁷ Play about head transplants. A lower-caste man who is handsome and an upper-caste man who is smart cross paths. English translation of the play: Karnad, G. (1975). *Hayavadana*. Calcutta, India: Oxford University Press. The play was based on Thomas Mann's novel: Mann, T.(1941). *The transposed heads: A legend of India*. New York: Alfred Knopf.

⁴⁴⁸ Land of snakes.

Lakshmi: What about Tamil playwrights? Which of the plays you think are women - oriented? We talked about some women-oriented plays earlier. But there have been others. Can you tell us about them?

Mangai: Yeah. When you talk about playwrights in Tamil, invariably I think they are male-playwrights – people who sit down and write plays. In that sense, I mean since Muthuswami’s name is recognised at the national level as a Tamil playwright. I think of his plays *Kattianganar*,⁴⁴⁹ you know *Kattianganar* is a major text, which is a comment on women and media. You know it’s about how there is this bank, which sells masks to enhance the sexual virility in each family. It’s called a *Makkal Vangi* — people’s bank. So the whole debate about, do women actually want their male members, their husbands or lovers to have masks of the actors? You know, I mean you must have known – you know where you hear about a woman who slept on the poster of MGR⁴⁵⁰, you know, so I mean, we can go to crazy limits to do that and how media really affects that. And then, but then in that a woman’s voice is really powerful. You know she says she doesn’t accept her own husband when he comes in with his own face. She says how do I differentiate between a face and a mask? (...) The rest of the plays, except of late, you know, Muthuswami’s recent play called *Padukalam*⁴⁵¹, which really focuses on the relationship between war and women, especially, again set within a mythical as well as an everyday kind of role. (...) His recent *Padukalam* somehow gives me that feeling that there is a lot more gender-based discourse that’s evolving. Otherwise, *Narkalikal* (The Chair People) or *Chuvarottikal* (Posters) — his major plays have very little of the presence of women. I am not talking about character as women, which anyway he doesn’t have. I mean, he doesn’t work on the traditional notion of characterisation. But then Indira Parthasarathy⁴⁵² does. I mean, at least the early plays of Indira Parthasarathy. I mean everybody talks about *Ramanujan*⁴⁵³ and *Nanadan Kadai*⁴⁵⁴ and *Porvai Porthiya Utalkal* (bodies covered in blankets)⁴⁵⁵ and all that at the national level. But then his early plays are *Mazai*, (*The Rain*); *Kalayandram* is a little later. You have *Kongai Thee*. All these are Indira Parthasarathy’s plays, especially *Mazai* and *Porvai Porthiya Utalkal* are all psychological and the protagonists are mainly women. And *Porvai Porthiya Utalkal* especially between the mother and the daughter, you know the very uneasy relationship that’s there between them. And somehow I find it very puerile in terms of gender psychology as well as feminist psychology, you know they are really.... But unfortunately except *Mazai* of which we have had a reading. In Tamil, these plays haven’t been performed. (...)

Lakshmi: Mangai what about plays which have been directed by women like Mu. Jeeva? Do you think that when they direct a play, the perspective is different?

⁴⁴⁹ Name of character; is a “fool” or “joker” type character.

⁴⁵⁰ M.G.Ramachandran: A very popular hero of Tamil films who later become the Chief Minister of Tamilnadu.

⁴⁵¹ Battlefield.

⁴⁵² Male playwright who took his wife’s name in marriage.

⁴⁵³ Playwright.

⁴⁵⁴ Story of Nanada.

⁴⁵⁵ Based on actual incident in which Dahlits were burned for trying to enter an upper-caste community. It is a Tamil play (meaning: bodies covered by blankets) by Indira Parthasarathy a well known Tamil playwright.

Mangai: With Mu. Jeeva, she definitely wanted to do something different. Mainly you know she did her own translation of *Antigone*, *Medea* and she also did her own scripts – you know one *Setiyin Thalattu*⁴⁵⁶. After this Tamrabarani massacre⁴⁵⁷, she did a play called *Tamrabarani* which really caused her a lot of problem because Krishnaswamy⁴⁵⁸ was standing for election there and there were other kinds of political issues which came with that. And I also thought she was trying something different; you know she also plays them. Unlike Ramanujan sir who tried to adapt Greek texts, or I think even Shenbagam Ramaswamy to some extent adapted *Antigone* when she got it into *Durgaraval*. But Jeeva tried to keep to the original and she retained the Greek names. She also tried to have the some choric action, you know, tried to kind of get a Greek flavour. I am not sure whether it was different because it was Jeeva or because Jeeva was a woman. But it was certainly a very different experience, you know, there was no effort to push one woman's tale. Somehow it became very multiple, even *Medea*. Her chorus was a very powerful chorus. We haven't really discussed Jeeva's plays in great detail in Tamil context, but I always felt there was a restlessness in her which made her come back to these texts with a lot of intensity.⁴⁵⁹ But unfortunately for the past two-three years, we haven't seen Jeeva at work, you know, because of domestic reasons and she is living in Trivandrum now quite cut off from the Tamil scene. But I would like to believe that she would come back to theatre. Yeah, that's it about Jeeva.

Lakshmi: Mangai, as a part of raising awareness regarding women's issues, many street theatres were performed like *Mulgi Zaali Ho (A Girl is Born)*, *Om Swaha* (A chant spoken during rituals with holy fire when offerings are made to the fire) in different parts of India like Maharashtra, Delhi and so on. How would you view these plays and what is your own concept of a feminist theatre?

Mangai: I think it's a really difficult question to – we can just think about it perhaps, you know, I mean it's very interesting because around the time when *Mulgi Zaali Ho* was there in Maharashtra, we had *Om Swaha* in Delhi and without knowing anything about those things, somewhere I mean we also started either performing Hashmi's *Aurat* in Tamil or even the first play – Chennai Kalai Kuzhu (Chennai Art Group) was formed in '84. And there were already other smaller groups of various women's organisations and all that. So some way in the beginning of the '80s, all of us have started something which we realised much later. I mean its only in the '90s that our exchanges have shown us that 'Okay, we all started together almost without knowing that we are doing almost similar things.' But I don't know. There are people who refrain from using the word, feminist theatre. I am conscious that women's theatre or gendered theatre and feminist theatre are all different terminologies. Actually, they also mean different things. The moment we use the word feminist theatre, to me it becomes a question of one's ideology – both about the form as well as the content. (...) I feel we can't justify our means by using the word that my content is very radical. I can talk about, for example... we had this Shakti Cultural - we called ourselves Shakti Cultural Group of AIDWA. So, we had to do this play.

⁴⁵⁶ "Lullaby of a plant."

⁴⁵⁷ Massacre of Dalits.

⁴⁵⁸ Dr. Krishnaswamy is a political leader who represents Dalit politics in Tamilnadu.

⁴⁵⁹ Jeeva was very thematic in her work, producing work in response to social and political events .

There was that military rape in Tripura. I am talking about '85, '86 and when we did that play, one major concern that we had was that we are talking about rape. But we don't want to show the violence of rape in a physical sense because I don't think rape is just violence. I mean much later we also tried to enact *Black Horse Square* – your story – which we tried to enact. So I think we also wanted to raise this question of how are we going to portray or represent rape on stage? So if I remember right, we never showed the rapist, you know, we only showed initially the terror you know – *Enna Sollarathu* (What does one say) where your whole body becomes alien to you and you just don't want to belong to this body as an offshoot of that and all that. So somewhere I think feminist theatre to me should not stop with just the content question. That's my, you know, — because I saw *Mulgi Zaali Ho* in '96 in *Kulavat*⁴⁶⁰ though I have heard about it right from '83. I saw it and for me it was '83, '80s stuff, where you directly talk, ask women – come, organise, let us give a clarion call to that. But I think street theatre has come a long way; I mean, even if you call that street theatre or protest theatre or poster theatre, agitprop, use whatever name — even that has come a long way, (...) We also did that ...I mean when the Dadar Express⁴⁶¹ incident took place, you know, three young Kerala women were raped in broad daylight. Dadar Express starts from here in the morning. So before it reached Arakonam this incident took place. Immediately after that we had a picketing in front of Southern Railway office and we...we can't call it a play, but we did have a presentation of sorts as part of the picketing and that has its own say. But I think feminist theatre should take into account the perspective, the whole aesthetics behind what is the life point of view, or you know, what does it say about life itself? (...)

Lakshmi: Mangai where would you place a play like *The Vagina Monologues*⁴⁶² by Eve Ensler. How do you look at it?

Mangai: Actually in terms of context, it's also like those *Om Swaha*, *Mulgi Zaali Ho*, kind of plays in the sense that it was a project. It based itself on fieldwork and study and it was done completely on an activist forum, you know, letting women talk about their body, their sexual experience, and things which are considered as taboo generally. So in that sense I think it definitely has a masterful place you know, in the whole thing. Also there are sections in that which I, if I remember right - there is one on Bosnian women's rape where they talk about my vagina was a countryside or something. I still remember there were two of my own students as part of basic theatre skills - they just did it using cowbells, one which gives you that high pitched 'oh' – that countryside bit, and the other one very base. Now it is torn, its hanging, so the very voice quality along with those bell sounds...it was such a moving, intense experience, when the girls did it. About 10 to 11, not even 12 minutes, you know it was within that. (...)

Lakshmi: There have been many women directors in other languages and also in Tamil who have been trying to attempt a kind of a theatre which has the aesthetic quality and it

⁴⁶⁰ Name of a Theatre Festival.

⁴⁶¹ A devastating fire gutted a compartment of the Guwahati-bound Dadar Express, disrupting rail traffic for eight hours. No one was injured in this incident.

⁴⁶² *The Vagina Monologues* was written by Eve Ensler and is based on interviews with over 200 women about their memories and experiences of sexuality. It is now translated into 24 languages.

also has what they want to convey like Anuradha Kapoor, Anamika Haksar and in Tamil I would say Prasanna Ramaswami⁴⁶³. How would you view their plays?

Mangai: Anuradha to a large extent has been somebody to whom I have looked up to. I think she, in fact, raised a lot of questions which set me thinking, otherwise I might not have consciously thought of them. And Anamika's work, I am an absolute fan of Anamika's work. (...) And if you really look at Anuradha's range of work you know whether beginning from *Nayika Bhed* which talks about re-interpreting myths and all that to her *Sundari – An Actor Prepares* which is about Jayashankar Sundari. Also the different styles - each of her performances is a major research. And I absolutely enjoyed the way how she connected Brecht's *Antigone* to Gujarat riots⁴⁶⁴. (...) And also it's Keerti Jain again from Delhi who tried to enact *The Other Side of Silence* — Urvashi Butalia's⁴⁶⁵ partition stories. There is that one story of this village full of Sikh women who commit suicide by jumping into the well. I am sure you will remember that story. You know on stage, it was those, you know, nursery play-school slide, those short ones-metal slide. That was there on stage. So initially there are all children playing on the slide, that's it. And then suddenly it shifts to becoming a well and towards the end when this woman tries to fall, you know, the pit is so full that she can't really fall down. (...)

Lakshmi: You were talking about directors elsewhere. What about Tamilnadu itself?

Mangai: Actually in Chennai, recently, as I was talking about Gujarat riots, during the Kargil war⁴⁶⁶, the war was on and we had this big state machinery projecting all military people as saviours of our country and all that, and patriotism whipped up. And it's around the time that Prasanna Ramaswami did her *Meendum-Meendum*⁴⁶⁷. *Meendum-Meendum* is actually a collage of texts drawn from different sources. We started with *Trojan Women* and then moved to Sri Lankan Tamil poetry, especially by women and Gandhari's *Oppari*⁴⁶⁸ in Therukoothu where she mourns the death of all her children and a text called *Body Count* which talks about the *Vietnam war* and there is a sole survivor who talks about what happened to her village. (...)

Lakshmi: Mangai, what do you think should be done to evolve a strong and powerful and meaningful feminist theatre? (...)

⁴⁶³ Well known female playwrights.

⁴⁶⁴ Also called Godhra riots in 2002; a series of riots and mob violence between Hindus and Muslims triggered on February 22, 2002 by a fire in a train carrying Hindu women and children returning from Ayodhya, the site of the demolished Babri Masjid mosque. Hindu right-wing factions believed the fire to have been started by Muslims – a disputed claim. As a result, many Muslims were killed and the right-wing Hindu government refused to allow charges to be filed against the rioters.

⁴⁶⁵ Founder of *Kali for Women*, India's first women's publishing house. She was also interviewed for the GF project. She has been active in the women's movement in India, in international citizen's exchange conferences, and in researching the modern history of India.

⁴⁶⁶ Kargil is located in Kashmir. Kashmir has been disputed between India and Pakistan ever since independence in 1947. After some fighting at that time, there has been a cease-fire line - which Kargil is near – but also charges of infiltration, guerrilla activity, and terrorism. In 1999, India and Pakistan came very close to a war when Pakistani troops infiltrated Kargil.

⁴⁶⁷ “again and again and again and again...”

⁴⁶⁸ A mourning song sung by women.

Mangai: I can only think of what we shouldn't be doing. Because that's actually, most people I think including me, we are sensing that it is happening. Because if you remember way back in '90 when Madhusree and Flavia⁴⁶⁹ organised Expressions.⁴⁷⁰ I mean for me that was the first time that you really met women from different arts. And then of course everybody talks about the '83 conference in Delhi where different people came and Chandralekha⁴⁷¹ designed the Kali poster, Kali publication house came up and all that. But then '96, from '90 to '96, I don't think anything happened. '96 we organised *Kulavai* here and if I just take from that period to say, 2000 or 2001. In fact, I remember Usha Ganguly⁴⁷² saying within a span of two years, she has attended like 17 Women's Theatre Festivals, you know. And most of them government-sponsored from all regions. So somewhere just like everything else, I think feminism as a discourse is also a rich ground for people to appropriate. The first person to do that obviously would be the establishment and theatre unfortunately does not have many men who actually understand what these feminists are doing in theatre. (...)

Lakshmi: Mangai, I would like to know how you conceived the image of this Kurathi, this gypsy woman in one of your plays. Was there any literary background to this Kurathi image⁴⁷³?

Mangai: Yeah, I think Tamil is replete with Kurathi⁴⁷⁴, no? Right from *Sangam age* to *Kuravanji*. We have a whole genre of gypsy literature if I may call it so. You know its called *Kuravanji*. 18th century was it? Around 18th century one of those *sitrillakiyam*⁴⁷⁵, minor literary genres. And, well, I think she is a very powerful image. Someone who can roam around and earn, has medicinal knowledge. And at least *Sangam kurathi* is a woman who can prophecy. And she is always the kind of a person who will reveal to the world what is in the *talaivi's*⁴⁷⁶ mind. So, somewhere I think gypsy has been a very, strong literary trope. (...)

Lakshmi: Did this *kurathi*⁴⁷⁷ image evolve out of a workshop or something that you attended?

Mangai: No. I think *kurathi* image was already there. That was the starting point and professor Ramanujan Sir was approached on behalf of Voicing Silence [group] to have that as a focal point and do a workshop around it. (...)

Lakshmi: Did the *Mouna Kuram* play come out of this workshop?

Mangai: Yeah. Actually it was very interesting the way Ramanujan Sir structured the whole thing. He literally reversed the whole order in which it's usually presented, you know. Usually,

⁴⁶⁹ Flavia Agnes, also interviewed for the Global Feminisms project.

⁴⁷⁰ A women's festival and theatre workshop.

⁴⁷¹ A legendary Indian dancer known for reinterpreting classical traditions in Indian dance and for her activism in the women's movement in India.

⁴⁷² Feminist writer.

⁴⁷³ *kurathi*: Nomadic tribal woman character.

⁴⁷⁴ Gypsies.

⁴⁷⁵ Genre for writing about gypsy women.

⁴⁷⁶ *Talaivi* : The female protagonist.

⁴⁷⁷ *kurathi*: Nomadic tribal woman character; gypsy women.

in a *Kuranvanji* play, you have the *talaivi* first; the protagonist... the woman is actually the woman who is in love and the gypsy woman just comes into prophecy and all that. But what he did here was to introduce the *kurathi* first. The gypsy woman is the one who comes in first and all her meetings with those other women actually comes as flashbacks that she is narrating to her partner, who actually comes in search of her and all that. So it's a very interesting way by which he actually made her the central figure. (...) So it was a very interesting mix of the classical and the folk which he gave, you know, and that's how *Mouna Kuram* was formed. In that sense, it is *mouna kuram*, you know, I usually translate it as silenced prophecies. So this *Kuravanji* is not about the prophecies that were spoken but only those that were silenced, you know, that's why I think *Mouna Kuram* is a very interesting way in which it evolved. (...)

Lakshmi: Mangai, I want to know about your play *Avvai*⁴⁷⁸. In the popular image *Avvai* is a wise old woman, you know. And this whole thing was transformed in your play. So I am very much interested in knowing about this play. Can you tell us something about it?

Mangai: Ya, I think being wise was fine, you know. I mean, if somebody calls a woman wise, that's ok. But then I think this whole connection between 'she was wise because she was old' or at least greyed, not necessarily old, that connection which really caused, I think, a little bit of unease perhaps. And this play actually tries to address that. And as far as Tamil context goes, it has a very definite context to work from within. Because we had T.K. Shanmugam's *Avvaiyar* play. And then Vasana made this film based on that play and called it *Avvaiyar* and you know, that *Parasakthi*⁴⁷⁹ came around the same time. So *Parasakthi* became a Dravidian movement's⁴⁸⁰ voice and *Avvaiyar* became the voice that Vasana⁴⁸¹ was representing. So with all this around, you know there was this need to really explore into that. But I think for the play, the whole thing started with Inkulab⁴⁸² giving this lecture on female voices in Tamil literature. And he talked about Sappho and in the same breath, referred to *Avvai*. And he said, I see this *Avvai* as a woman holding a toddy pot⁴⁸³ in her hand and you know, walking as a tribal girl might do or something like that. It's a single line which really caught my attention. So, and that was also a time, I was working in Tirunelveli⁴⁸⁴. And...when the Babri Masjid incident happened, from the University, we formed this communal harmony unit and moved to a lot of places where Hindus and Muslims almost lived together. Because we needed to really safeguard the Muslim localities in that area. So, you know, for me, this gave a kind of a really alternate image. It's like saying, 'Oh god, why didn't I think of all this before'. You know, it was like that. So I thought there was, this would be an alternate image of a woman. So that's how I think *Avvai* was conceived, we can say. (...)

Lakshmi: What was the emerging voice of *Avvai* in this play and the image of *Avvai*? Image of course, you have changed her completely and made her into a young woman. But what was the emerging voice in the play of *Avvai*?

⁴⁷⁸ Name of a person; eminent female poet in Tamil who lived in the 4th or 5th century.

⁴⁷⁹ *Parasakthi*: A popular film which represented the views of the Dravidian Movement which became a kind of cult film.

⁴⁸⁰ The Dravidian Movement to put it simply, represented the views and aspirations of the non-brahmins as against the brahmins.

⁴⁸¹ S.S.Vasana - S.S.Vasana, a film producer who was a brahmin, an upper caste person.

⁴⁸² Male Tamil playwright.

⁴⁸³ Toddy is the fresh or fermented sap of various chiefly East Indian palms.

⁴⁸⁴ Town in S. Tamil Nadu.

Mangai: I think first is that she is sensuous, you know, and I still remember how people got very flustered when she comes in with a...she actually sits on the shoulder of two men and they carry her in. So you know *Padini Vandal, Padini Vandal*⁴⁸⁵. So she announces the whole play. *Azagiya Avvai Padini Vandal*⁴⁸⁶. I think that summarises the whole thing. So you have toddy in one hand and you have love in the other hand, you know. So these are the two main things with which she comes. So that itself actually kind of projects a voice which has never been accepted. I think it was always there. And, what she also brings about is her relationship with other female voices. (...) But then I think on the whole, the voice of a woman who can be sensuous and who can be very earthy, can love toddy and talk about meat almost as if she is talking about poetry. So somebody like that actually became a very frightening woman. I mean, it's like it was staged in '98 and then the text is now prescribed for a language course in Manonmaniyam Sundaram University. And BJP Tamil Nadu has passed a resolution saying that this is an insult to this old, wise Tamil poet because she is having toddy and she is also talking about love. But here is a woman who said, 'Won't I shout out my love?' *Aah ena koovuven kol*. And she does talk very clearly about her *Palai*⁴⁸⁷ poetry, where she talks about the heat of love, I don't know how you would interpret it. But then, it is that. (...) So the play is actually talking about an already recorded voice of *Avvai* through her poetry to look at her face, you know, to discover her face. In fact, *athuthan*, that's what Inkulab says, he says *Moodiya pazamai tusai vilakki* (to remove the dust of tradition). So it's all this dust that's covering her face which you have just cleared so that her face can emerge. (...)

Excerpt from the play "Avvai"

Vandal, Padini Vandal ("Here come the songstress; here comes the songstress. With music and dance she comes.")

Azagiya Avvai Padini Vandal ("Beautiful Avvai songstress comes. Not offering words of wisdom. Some words with toddy, some words with love")

Lakshmi: Mangai, I know that I have broken the chronology of your work by asking you about *Avvai* after *Mouna Kuram*. Can you tell us what you did after *Mouna Kuram* before you did *Avvai* because then I'll be able to keep the chronology of the plays that you have done.

Mangai: After *Mouna Kuramtjo*, as part of Voicing Silence work was *Chuvadagal*⁴⁸⁸. You know, almost simultaneously *Chuvadagal* and *Mouna Kuramtji*. But actually *Chuvadagal* work began before *Mouna Kuram*. It began as part of my AIDWA work. Because we started working on the story of *Manalur Maniamma*⁴⁸⁹. This communist leader of the '50s from Tanjavur region⁴⁹⁰. We,

⁴⁸⁵ "Here come the songstress; here comes the songstress. With music and dance she comes."

⁴⁸⁶ "Beautiful Avvai songstress comes. Not offering words of wisdom. Some words with toddy, some words with love"

⁴⁸⁷ *Palai*: The Tamil region in ancient Tamil poetry was divided into 5 different regions – Kurinji, Mullai, Marudham, Neidhal, Palai. - Kurinji-Hill region, Mullai-Forests and pastoral region, Marudham-Wetland plains, Neidhal- Land along sea coast and Palai-Arid land.

⁴⁸⁸ "Impressions."

⁴⁸⁹ Name of a town and a woman.

I think, initially we called it just *Manalur Maniamma* and staged it in one of the conferences in Nagapatnam. But then I picked it up again. The whole structure changed quite a bit and performed it as part of Voicing Silence. We called it *Chuvadagal*. And, I mean, around the same time, Rajam Krishnan's novel called *Paadhaiyil Padintha Adigal*⁴⁹¹, again based on her life had already come. (...) So Manalur Maniamma is actually born a Brahmin, married at the age of nine, widowed within two years. But her husband actually gave her English education. A lady came home. So this whole play talks about how she encounters life at different points. She was in the Congress Movement and then joined the Communist Party and all that. It's actually reconstructed. So it's a team of these nomadic singers who sing the life of Manalur Maniamma in *Chuvadagal*. (...) But it's more a cadre play. You know, it's meant for people who are interested in particular histories of movements, of people who are working, already registered as people who are working, in the struggle. So that way this is a documentation. In fact, I called it a docu-drama, which is a genre, as a genre also I really liked it. (...) *Chuvadagal* is my fourth play on the theme of female infanticide or foeticide? So we started with *Karpathin kural*⁴⁹² where the actual talk comes from the child, a new-born baby...which says, just let me live, I will make my own living. Please don't kill me now. And then we move to... Actually it began with, as a debate you know, when the India Today article⁴⁹³ came in '87 entitled *Born to Die* and which exposed this whole issue of female infanticide or foeticide, we had to do something. So the initial format was a debate form. (...) *Pachcha Mannu* as a play is structured in a very, not loose, in a very flexible way. So, we had a beginning and the middle but we didn't have an end. At least we didn't have a definite end. So depending on how the audience responded, we kept changing it. So it's a take off on Augusto Bowal's Theatre of the Oppressed, where he called it Forum Theatre where you use theatre only as a pretext for a discussion. But what we had was, we had rehearsed about five different endings. And depending on how the response was, we just took it. So the actual performance was about 30 to 35 minutes, I guess. But then the show would go on for even more than an hour and a half, you know, so that's how *Pachcha Mannu* was structured. (...)

Lakshmi: Tell us about *Vellavi* (Laundering clothes by steaming them) and your most recent and your most favourite play, *Pani-t-thee* (Frozen Fire)?

Mangai: *Vellavi* is actually based on an oral history of a *dhobi*⁴⁹⁴ woman. And this actually evolved as a student project, which Parthibaraja⁴⁹⁵ took up in his own native village called Peruvakottai. So he knows this woman and who has been part of his family. She has been his family *dhobi*. And she is around 80 and her real name is Marudayi. So that, I mean they were almost all his classmates had collected all these oral histories. And they are also published now in Tamil. (...) When we look at *Pani-t-thee*, on the other hand, it's completely set in a mythical space⁴⁹⁶. And it's also a namesake. It's based on your name, the pen name that you chose. In fact I remember asking you around that time when I was working, 'Why did you choose that pseudonym?' And then you were talking about the androgyny that it represents. Ambai, Ambai's

⁴⁹⁰ 200 miles south of Madras.

⁴⁹¹ Footprints on the path.

⁴⁹² "Voice from the womb"; a play about female infanticide.

⁴⁹³ In June, 1986, *India Today* published an explosive cover story, "Born to Die," which estimated that 6,000 female babies had been poisoned to death during the preceding 10 years in a district in Tamil Nadu.

⁴⁹⁴ Washer woman; indicates caste.

⁴⁹⁵ Male student.

⁴⁹⁶ Lakshmi chose "Ambai" as her pen name.

story, the story of Ambai in *Mahabharata*. (...) But then, Ambai is this tiny little character in the story. But actually like Bheeshma⁴⁹⁷, who has seen generations, I think Ambai also sees generations. So it's a take-off on that. And the additional fillip for me in this play was that I knew that Usharani with whom I have been working for the past four-five years will be doing that as a solo piece. And it's the first time that she will be doing a solo piece but you know, I mean, that is a play where I think in terms of form. You know, one is always scared, though you like those traditional forms, to negotiate with them. You don't know how much you can enter into it, how much of the tradition that you don't want to tamper, and all that. But then, in this I thought you can freak out, you know, I mean this is a solo piece which is very contemporary in terms of concern, but set within a mythological framework, and again set within traditional format. But then we had this fabulous freedom to work with because its just a solo piece. And also as a theatre piece, I don't think *Pani-t-thee* can be seen only as a play text. You know, somewhere like they say total theatre for music, dance and everything in a way this is a total text as far as I am concerned because the costumes have a role to play in this, you know the whole make-up and costume because she comes in, in this full male attire of the *Koothu*. And as she kind of, what do you say, unlayering? You know as she kind of removes one after another, she transforms herself. And by the time she changes her makeup, she becomes Ambai. You know, so costume is part of that, and there is this, also this very interesting digression from you know, what it is to be a male and what it is to be a female. (...)

Lakshmi: Mangai, you have travelled to many parts of India as a part of your theatre experience. Can you tell us something about one such theatre experience you have had outside Tamilnadu?

Mangai: Outside Tamilnadu, we have gone for a few performances, you know either in Tiruchur⁴⁹⁸, as part of Women's Theatre Festival or in Delhi as part of NSD. And much earlier, when I was working with Chennai Kalai Kuzhu⁴⁹⁹ as part of Sehmat you know Street Theatre festivals and all of that. Of late, I think it started in '98 – from '98 I have also kept in touch with Surya Cultural Group in Batikola, Sri Lanka. It's kind of not very formulated...because these experiences haven't really been consolidated yet in me. I always kind of have very strong emotional experience whenever I recall, because Sri Lanka is a crisis-torn place. And this is a group, it's a women's group which has a cultural group and tries to kind of work on, you know, either talking about issues that are prevalent or talking about the stories that they would like to share. (...) So in '98, we had this very brief week-long workshop. Most of them were already performing other street plays you know, they had already performed like three or four plays and they had the support of theatre people in and around Baticola. So in that sense they were not novices to this form. So we didn't start from elementary thing. We started from basically sharing experiences and then trying to evolve plays out of that. And I think we did three short presentations in the first workshops. (...) And we just put together four stories you know either a rape, by the military, and one of their own men, you know, to a school-going girl...and or what you would call as molestation but not rape you know, of this elderly uncle who will come and caress, in the name of caressing, how there is the sexual abuse of a female body. And we also had to deal with this real case. And they were fighting this case about this four year old young

⁴⁹⁷ Bheeshma: A character in the epic, *Mahabharata*.

⁴⁹⁸ Tiruchur is a town in Kerala (state on the western side of the southern tip of the Indian subcontinent).

⁴⁹⁹ Arts group from Chennai.

girl called Krishanti who was harassed by her father and her mother was away you know, which is a standard phenomenon. They were in a... she was working as a nurse abroad. And so this child doesn't even know what it was that this man was hitting her from, with, you know. She described it as a stick. And I heard, and I heard the child talk about all these things in - I am sorry. (Breaks into tears.) And it was this recorded voice of that child. *Avar saarathilirindhu oru porulai etuthu kuthuvaru*. ("From inside his clothes he will take out a thing and prick me with it.") And her anus was red and they were giving her treatment and also fighting a case. And in the play actually it was this Surya Cultural worker who was handling this case who had to say it. I don't know what I am moved by, you know. I don't know whether it is the voice of the child or this girl Jayanthi who was dealing with the issue, who narrated it on stage...

We had this play called *Mattanagar Kannakigal*⁵⁰⁰ about their lost man. You know, there was this whole village near Baticola. Baticola is such a beautiful place, good lagoon and you know it's described as *meenpadum mattanagar* (Where fish sing). And there is that one village there, where after the IPKF (Indian Peace Keeping Force)⁵⁰¹ operation, almost all men below the age of 18, in that particular village all men below the age of 18 had been killed. (...) So we set it in the *oppari* form like, these were three stories — one is this widow, the other one is where this girl actually becomes mad waiting for him and she dresses up everyday you know, goes and stands, and the whole village mocks at her and makes fun of her for all that and all that and the mother tells the story of this mad girl. And then we had this one other story, which is, which is about, you know, this woman with three children who, whose husband never came back. And, we kind of structured it in an *oppari* form, you know *oppari* is again wailing. In Tamilnadu it didn't sound, I mean, it was significant and I thought it was a very powerful medium to express that. But in Sri Lanka, even for a performance, I think *oppari* is difficult to handle. So, even when we set it, most of them couldn't come out of that and they couldn't sing and one of them, the woman who had three children, you know, it was her *Chitthi's* story, her mom's younger sister. So she said, 'I won't perform it in my place'. You know, she won't, she can't tolerate it. And, they had lot of reservations. But for me, I always feel that a certain kind of physical expression to your agonies gives you a framework to work with and maybe you will come out of it. So like a usual, typical director perhaps, I just told them, 'No, you keep doing it, it will be okay.' But then I reached Madras and then within two days, Vasuki⁵⁰² who is the co-ordinator of Surya Cultural Group, she called me and she said, that woman who said that she won't perform in her village, her mom had died. And there were like two other women in the group, who got some messages of death. And all of them thought it was because we were using this *oppari* form. You know, for the first time I began to wonder. Does form have its own breath? You know and they found it very difficult. It was only much later, in '99; I was attending a conference in *Trinkonmali*⁵⁰³, when they revived that play for me, you know, and they performed it again. And now of course, they have come to terms with it and they are performing. And this girl who acted mad actually had a brief stint of madness and was treated — you know it was like, it sounds very superstitious, but it happened. And I, I am still resolving that. Of course, I went back again in 2002 and we did

⁵⁰⁰ "Town girl."

⁵⁰¹ Response to news story that India military had killed all of the males in Sri Lanka as part of a peacekeeping process sanctioned by the India government.

⁵⁰² someone in the troupe.

⁵⁰³ Sri Lanka.

this play called *Oru Pidi Anbu*⁵⁰⁴. And it was in that workshop that we actually had this – what do you call it – this is like a collage. I mean Vasuki drew that and then they just stuck whatever colour, a piece of cloth that they liked, onto this picture, and that’s why it’s very precious you know, where you patch up your lives and give shape to it. Just like how people talk about quilts. I think this is something very, very, precious as far as I am concerned. And in that play, we ended with one of Vilvaratnam’s poem, you know, which says, “Why don’t you give me one handful of love?” *Oru Pidi Anbu* that’s what we called it. *Oru Pidi Anbu*- (Sings) (...)

Lakshmi: Mangai how did you choose an epic character like *Manimekalai* for one of your plays?

Mangai: Actually that was a continuation of *Avvai* you know, *Avvai* was actually exploring into the Sangam poetry. So naturally Tamil literature became a major source, a major reservoir of various themes. And also, I think, we, you know how we can think of alternate images. Not from the *Ramayana*⁵⁰⁵, *Mahabharata*⁵⁰⁶ epics but from alternate traditions. And Buddhism and Jainism have been the two major alternate traditions of India, you know, though we don’t have it, though it is not prevalent today. We have remnants of it. We have historical records of that. And I think, in Tamil, *Chilapathikarkam*⁵⁰⁷ and *Manimekalai*⁵⁰⁸, the twin epics, both of them have female protagonists. I mean good enough reason for you to really look into that. So mainly I think it was Buddhism and especially the character *Manimekalai*. At one go she was actually giving alternative to caste as well as the problem of gender as it is constructed in a patriarchal society. So *Manimekalai* seemed one of the major images from Tamil literature and Inkulab⁵⁰⁹ was also keen on that. I think he was willing to work on the play. Because we knew we were going to work with *Isai Natakam*⁵¹⁰ artists, the traditional format – of course, he didn’t set it to that form. He wrote a script first and then we had to kind of tune it. But we knew that this will be all female performance coming from this particular genre. So, that was how we struck on *Manimekalai*.

Lakshmi: In *Avvai*, you did a transformation of the entire image. Did you do the same in *Manimekalai* or *Manimekalai* is a radical enough image in the original epic itself?

⁵⁰⁴ “One handful of love.”

⁵⁰⁵ Story of Ram.

⁵⁰⁶ Story of a woman who is married to five brothers.

⁵⁰⁷ Kovalan is a hero of the epic and the father of *Manimekalai*, and is married to *Kannagi*. *Kannagi* is the lead female character in the Tamil epic *Sillapathikaram* written by Illango Adikal. *Kannagi* epitomizes the power of chaste woman. She avenged the wrongful death of her husband *Kovalan* who was executed by the *Pandiya King* without a trial because the King thought *Kovalan* stole the queen’s anklet. *Kannagi*, a subdued housewife till then, went to the court and proved that her husband was innocent. She then commanded the fire goddess to burn down the whole city leaving women, children and old people. She symbolizes the power of chaste woman. She is worshipped as a goddess.

⁵⁰⁸ *Kovalan* was in love with a courtesan *Madavi* and had a daughter *Manimekalai*. She is the protagonist for *Sillapathikaram*’s sister epic, “*Manimekalai*.” *Manimekalai* becomes a Buddhist nun and devotes her entire life to feeding the poor and destitute using a magical bowl called *Amudasurabi* (one that never depletes of food). In the video clip they enact the scene where *Manimekalai* picks up *Amudasurabi* from the pond. Both *Kannagi* and *Manimekalai* are strong women, celebrated and revered for their strength, courage and sacrifices.

⁵⁰⁹ Professor and playwright, poet, leftist Muslim.

⁵¹⁰ Musical theater.

Mangai: I think so. Actually, except a few emphasis, it remains exactly to the point. You know, in the sense, right from... because *Manimekalai* as an epic has all the story within a story and all stories branching out and all that. (...)

Excerpt from the play “Manimekalai”

Actor 1: So, do you also support her? Everyone must go her way. Manimekalai must choose her path.

Actor 2: Chitravati, Manimekalai has attained wisdom. She'll not be caught in any relationship.

Actor 1: Who can stop this flood of light?

Manimekalai :I take leave of all of you. Like Kaveri river taking leave of the mountains of Kodagu. Soaking the path it travels before reaching the sea. From all the shores that have been denied water arises a cry...

All: A river walks to those shores to spread its soothing touch

Lakshmi: Mangai, how did you decide to do an epic, which is a classical format, you know, in a popular form?

Mangai: I don't know about other languages but at least in Tamil, I don't think these have been really compartmentalised. Like you have *Kovalan Charitram* you know, written by Shankardas Swamigal right, but he actually talks about it as *karna paramprai kathai* (age old story). So it must have been something like a tale, you know, which he consolidated into a play. And he knew *Chillapathikaram* existed at that time, you know. So somewhere I think there has been a relationship between the two. And then, I mean, if you extend popular to include films and on stage and all that, we have always fallen back on these resources to — for popular images, you know. Right from today's movies to anything for that matter. So, it didn't sound jarring at all to me. And I think epic proportion and the way the popular company dramas, as you call them, with music and all, the way they are performed are very similar. You know, it's kind of larger than life, anyway, and lot more stylised. So it really lend itself to that. (...)

EXCERPT FROM THE PLAY PANI-T-THEE AND VELLAVI AND EXCERPT FROM “WE WERE MAKING HISTORY” BY K.LALITHA AND SUSIE THARU

Excerpt from the play “Pani-t-thee”

Mangai: (directing the actor) Usha, we are doing that song portion. Take the portion from little before that. Remember, you are born a girl, but they announce it as a boy for your sex was going to change later. You are going to say how they teased you. It is about them and not your feelings.

Actor: So many heads – heads of kings.

And ripped off armour.

So many hands chopped.

So much rotting flesh, so much steaming guts, so many bodies that smell.

Nerves that lie shattered and bones.

Broken thigh and rotting tender feet.

War! War! The great war! A war to end all wars, a war to end time.

They flee, those denizens of the dark the spirits of dusk, the haunting ghosts

Blood-sucking vampires and gods of the night. Monstrous animals that fill the heart with fear. They flee, afraid and howling. They flee this great war.

This body...it's muscles, nerves taut as strings...these are not mine...they do not belong to me...

*My mother received a boon: "You'll give birth to a girl child and will turn into a boy."
She took it to heart and looked upon me, born a girl as a boy.*

Meanwhile, my father Draupada waited his time to kill Drona.

*And I who was not a boy, did not behave like one. There was Draupadi though she consoled me.
But a fire burnt in her. That touched me too.*

Oh, oh! Well, well...shame, shame,shame! Shameful! And suprising...

That you must refuse to be the lad you are. You must be, though – come on! Be the man that you are!

Oh, oh! Well, well! Shame, shame, shame! Shameful! And surprising...

Excerpt from the play "Vellavi"

During the Pongal festival on the 9th day we will go make the Pongal offering.

We will take all the children an the donkeys.

We will tie donkeys to a stone and then we will decorate the wash stone with turmeric and kumkum and worship.

We will worship the stone.

For us there is only one stone, the stone we wash the clothes on.

We don't allow our children to climb on the stone to ease themselves.

That is not our god. We'll never allow it to be used otherwise.

From Peruvakottai to Karaikudi some 20 donkeys – I walked them all by myself.

A child on my waist and one in my womb. All by myself I walked them.

All the women here – all the donkeys they have! Such thin ones! My donkeys were healthy.

Once loaded and given a pat; they will go on their own to riverside.

They were sold off.

Two went to Madurai and two to Salem. I sold them off.

Excerpt enacted from the book "We Were Making History" by K. Lalitha and Susie Tharu

My name is Kamamma. A doctor was taking classes in Suryapet. My son was just 10 months old. All of us were listening and he started crying. Every one was sitting there and he cried and I felt so embarrassed but the doctor said, "Don't worry, the future is his." But I felt bad. There was a comrade from my village. I gave him the child and told him, "Take him to my sister-in-law." She had just delivered a baby then and she suckled him and reared him up. My milk dried after some days. And so it went on. I felt I was just roaming around with them. I became pregnant again and it was time for the baby to be born, I delivered under the bushes at night. And so it went on for six months and then the leaders called me and they said, "Kamamma, either you must give the child away or you must leave us." Kamamma, either you must give the child away or you must leave us. Did you hear that? I was in no state to do that. I was scared in my belly. I couldn't have left them even if I had died. So I gave my baby. Its 36 years now. I don't know what happened to my son. How can one swallow a mother's grief?

My name is Vajramma. In those days, when the Razakars⁵¹¹ asked us to dance Bhaktakamma, we danced, when they asked us to strip, we stripped. Where was the sense of shame? Where was honour? We left the baby in the cradle and ran for our lives. That's all there was to it. We are all telling you the same story. What does it matter if I don't speak? What does it matter who is it that speaks? It's all the same story. Rajakka, you tell them. It was near her well. She will tell you. It's all the same story. They burnt, they killed, they raped. Do you think we can tell our story? I don't know how!

When the struggle was over, what are we to do with the women was the question. Hmmm. They said the unmarried women should go back and marry. The married women should go back to their families. The men should study law. They thought we can't be party organisers or area commanders. So they asked us to set ourselves right. We had never thought of clinging on to families, husband our children. Huh. Go back and marry? Marry whom? Which guy will have the guts to marry these women? There are so many Ailamma. They were so many women. Their lives have gone without a trace. We wanted to write our history? Who can do it. Only we can do it? We, who were part of that. But, we never had the resources. Not Ailamma, not Satyavathi, not me. It's because we couldn't write, it has come to you. We were making history.

⁵¹¹ Razakars: In 1947, before independence, there was Nizam rule in Hyderabad. The nawabs and the muslims around the Nizam thought that they should have an independent Hyderabad which should not co-operate with India. So the Razakar movement was started against a free India.

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS:
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: INDIA

**Transcript of Vina Mazumdar
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Vina Mazumdar was born in 1927 and educated at Calcutta, Banaras, and Oxford. She is an Honours Graduate and D.Phil from Oxford University. In her professional career she has been a teacher of Political Science in the Universities of Patna and Berhampur, an Officer in the UGC Secretariat and Fellow of the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Simla. She was Member Secretary, Committee on the Status of Women in India, and later Director, Programme of Women's Studies, Indian Council of Social Science Research for five years (1975-80). She was founder-Director of the Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi from 1980 to 1991, and thereafter was Senior Fellow at CWDS and JP Naik National Fellow, ICSSR for two years. She is one of the pioneers in Women's Studies in India and a leading figure of the women's movement. Since 1996 she has been the Chairperson, Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi.

C.S. Lakshmi (the interviewer) is a researcher in Women's Studies and a Tamil writer who writes under the pseudonym Ambai. She is currently the Director of SPARROW (Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women).

Vina Mazumdar Transcript

Vina Mazumdar calls herself a chronicler and recorder of the women's movement in India. She also fondly refers to herself as the grandmother of Women's Studies in India. As the Member Secretary of the Committee on the Status of Women in India she was instrumental in drafting what is now known as the Towards Equality report which has been the turning point both for Women's Studies and women's movement in India. She is the co-founder of the Center for Women's Development Studies in Delhi and has served as its Director for any years. This pioneering institution has greatly influenced the course Women's Studies has taken in India. Vina Mazumdar is 76 years old and is still active voicing her protest and influencing policies regarding women.

C.S.Lakshmi: Vinadi, you have called yourself a chronicler and recorder of the women's movement and grandmother of Women's Studies in South Asia. Your generation has also been called the 'Daughters of Independence.' As daughters of independence, did you inherit a women's movement?

Vina Mazumdar: Well, in terms of sheer...members of a particular generation, along with all the rest, I did shout that slogan 'Stree Swadheenata Zindabad.'⁵¹² You could say that we grew up with this kind of a feeling about being free in free India and be treated at par with men, beyond that, I have to confess that I wasn't aware of much of the issues beyond those experienced by middle class 'Bhadralok'⁵¹³ women in my part of the country. So there was no real consciousness of the women's issue as such. And that's why the whole exercise of the Committee On The Status Of Women⁵¹⁴ in India came as such a terrible shock. It's that terrible shame and outrage — that we claimed ourselves to be highly educated professional women, and social scientists at that, and we knew nothing about the lives of the overwhelming majority of women in this country — both, the lives that they had inherited, and the lives that they were facing in contemporary India. This was the real foundation for what I have described as the collective consciousness during the committee's exercise. It hit us all, to... the... particularly, the four who went on to become members of the drafting committee.

C.S.Lakshmi: In general what would you say was happening with women after independence? Because leaders like Kamaladevi⁵¹⁵ and all were still there, you know, they

⁵¹² Long Live Women's Freedom. *Stree*— (derived from Sanskrit) woman; *Swadheenata*—(derived from Sanskrit) freedom, independence; *Zindabad*—(Hindi/Urdu) hail; long live.

⁵¹³ "Bhadralok," which means gentleman or polite man, makes up less than 2 percent of the Indian population. It is a social group that originated in Bengal (a region now divided between the state of West Bengal in India and Bangladesh) during the period of British rule in the 18th and 19th centuries. Myths about the group's intellectual prowess, however, are still so dominant that even today people from Bengal are considered to be more educated and cultured than the rest of India.

⁵¹⁴ The Committee on the Status of Women in India was appointed by the government in 1971. The report, "Towards Equality" (1974) raised basic questions about the socialization processes inherent in a hierarchical society, about the resources, power and assets distribution patterns as well as diverse cultural values in the country.

⁵¹⁵ Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay—(1903 – 1988) often described as *Karmayogi* (literally, "saint of labor," conscientious worker) was the force behind the resurgence of traditional Indian crafts in post independent India. A woman ahead of her times, she set up the All India Handicrafts Board, the Crafts Council of India and its affiliate

were part of the freedom movement⁵¹⁶ — they were still there. So what would you say in general was happening?

Vina Mazumdar: Well, all this — some of this I heard much, much later, after the committee's report, when I went to request Kamladevi Chattopadhyay⁵¹⁷, whether she would record her memories of the pre-independence period. After thinking she did agree and that's the inception of "Indian Women's Battle for Freedom." But she told me one or two things which substantiated my personal experience of having sort of, fallen out of the struggle altogether you know. She said that when the Punjab⁵¹⁸ Assembly tried to change the inheritance laws, she went around Delhi,⁵¹⁹ to the women's organisations to mobilise some protest so that women would go to Chandigarh⁵²⁰ and demonstrate there. And she met with such lukewarm response that she was completely disheartened. She said, "You tell me that you had no consciousness. Well, I had some experience of that — I couldn't get enough support to fill one bus to go to Chandigarh and protest." There were quite a few other instances, which we found out during the committee's exercise. The most classical example of opposition to women's equality was, of course, Choudhary Charan Singh⁵²¹ when he was Chief Minister⁵²² of Uttar Pradesh,⁵²³ writing to the Home Secretary⁵²⁴ that, "Why do you keep recruiting women into the services? They are a headache." So, the Home Secretary very apologetically wrote back that it's not something that he could prevent and drew the Chief Minister's attention to Article 16 of the Constitution.⁵²⁵ The next letter from the Chief Minister said, "Well, at least, in that case, don't send any of them to Uttar Pradesh." Sucheta Kripalani⁵²⁶ when she was Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, had invited

bodies and the Regional Handicrafts Design Centers. She was also the first president of the World Crafts Council Asia Pacific Region.

⁵¹⁶ The freedom movement was a response to the expansion of the British Empire and the means employed to annex and expand, which forced changes for India. What resulted were many minor uprisings between 1816 and 1855, with the last and most severe revolt occurring 1857 -1859 in which both aristocracy and peasantry rallied against the British. Opposition to British rule began to increase at the turn of the century and the Indian National Congress began to push for a measure of participation in the Government of the country. An unpopular attempt to partition Bengal in 1905 resulted in mass demonstrations against it. Launching of the Swadeshi Movement brought the freedom movement to the ordinary people, by leaders like Bala Gangadhar Tilak and Aurobindo Ghose and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, mobilizing the people into a powerful force against the British in the freedom struggle.

⁵¹⁷ A freedom fighter, patron of traditional art and culture and a stalwart in the field of women's education.

⁵¹⁸ Punjab: A region in northern India, divided in 1947 between Pakistan and India.

⁵¹⁹ Delhi: city in northern India, of which the newer part, New Delhi, is the capital.

⁵²⁰ Chandigarh—an autonomous city that is the capital of the Indian states of Punjab and Haryana. It was planned by the famous architect Le Corbusier.

⁵²¹ Choudhary Charan Singh—(1902-1987) of the Janata Party, was the fifth Prime Minister of India, in office during 1979-1980.

⁵²² Chief Minister—head of the government of individual states in India.

⁵²³ Uttar Pradesh—state in north India

⁵²⁴ Home Secretary—heads the Ministry of Home Affairs, which aids and advises State Governments on matters of internal and national security and peace.

⁵²⁵ Article 16 of the (Indian) Constitution—"Equality of opportunity in matters of public employment." Mazumdar is referencing Clause 2 which states that "No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, descent, place of birth, residence or any of them, be ineligible for, or discriminated against in respect of, any employment or office under the State."

⁵²⁶ Sucheta Kripalani--first female Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh in 1936.

from Kerala⁵²⁷, a Gandhian lady — Mrs Karkut, I think, to build this women’s component within the community development programme, and she had built it on classical Gandhian⁵²⁸ lines you see, literacy, including knowledge of the constitutional new rights, economic activities and maternity and child health. They, that entire programme was smashed by Charan Singh, and Mrs Karkut was driven out.

C.S.Lakshmi: Vinadi, when the committee was set up, what was its mandate?

Vina Mazumdar: That we have to review, what we need is a review of the extent to which the constitutional provisions relating to women have been achieved. So, it begins with: [reads from book] “To examine the constitutional, legal, and administrative provisions that have a bearing on the social status of women, their education and employment. To assess the impact of these provisions during the period since independence. Then, on educational — specific references to educational development — problems of working women including discrimination in employment and remuneration. Status of women as housewives and mothers in the changing social patterns and case studies — to undertake case studies on the implications of population policies and family planning programmes on the Status Of Women.” In fact, the significant omission in this is, the word ‘political’ is completely missing. So the kind of ‘political’ awareness of the whole issue of women’s status that had developed during the freedom struggle, or that could be found in the writings of this man [Points to a book: *Gandhi on Women*] was completely absent. I mean, he went on saying that not only must women not suffer from any legal disabilities that men do not suffer from, they must have complete political equality. They must have the vote, but the problem does not end there. It only begins when women begin to women. Later, in trying to explain this paragraph I say, what he meant — to say, “women as women” you see, the collective consciousness. That’s what he had in mind.

C.S.Lakshmi: Vinadi when you were appointed as member of the committee, how did you think you would work on the report, considering what the mandate was?

Vina Mazumdar: I can say that in the first year of my membership, I was a very indifferent and disinterested member and also missed a few meetings and nothing much was actually going on. One meeting we went to, we were informed by the Member-Secretary that we had to meet the Minister in the afternoon with an outline of the report. I was wondering what sort of an outline, because none of us really had a clue what was the state of progress. Very few tours had been done, and what kind of information was being gathered, we just did not know. I just put down a few chapter headings and it was easy. We had set up several task forces, so I got – according to the various task forces - one chapter each, and in that, I added one chapter on the demographic perspective. And my colleagues asked me why had I introduced this? It was not within the terms of reference. So if I had the terms of reference before me as I did today, I would have drawn attention to that last term about population policies, but at that point, my only explanation was

⁵²⁷ One of the smallest states in India; located on the Malabar (western) coast at the southern tip of the Indian peninsula.

⁵²⁸ Gandhian—a follower of Mahatma Gandhi’s philosophies, the main tenets of which are usually identified as *ahimsa* (non-violence), *satyagraha* (quest for truth), *swadeshi* (self-sufficiency).

that my colleague in the UGC,⁵²⁹ Shankaranarayan had given me the report on the ‘Status Of Women in Japan.’ He said, “You are part of that committee, you might like to have a look at this.” And I found in that a chapter on demographic changes. So I thought you know that it would be a useful thing to have. None of us had a clue as to what were the demographic changes. So I said, “Well, that’s an exercise we can do still, there is no difficulty. There are excellent demographers in the country.” So, with that one sheet of chapter outline headings, we went to the Minister. Then, there was a message from the Planning Commission: Okay, there was a transition taking place, a new plan was about to be drafted, so if the committee had any suggestions... They decided that it would be good courtesy since a committee like this was already in session for more than a year-and-a-half. So again, a hasty exercise, with people saying something etc. So, at that stage, putting together whatever suggestions were worth anything coming from different members. I had to do the drafting job because our Member Secretary just wouldn’t do it.

And then she disappeared from the country and two years were about to expire. So, everybody expected that the committee would seek an extension. At that stage, some of us got together and told Phulrenudi, “We can’t go on like this so, and we refuse to be party to wasting public funds in this manner, so we would prefer to resign.” So she said, “I also will join you.” So, eight of us went and met the ministers with our resignation letter. At which stage he said, “Don’t, Please don’t publicise this. Give me a little time.” So within, literally within 10 days, he had got the committee reconstituted and the only real change was that the Member- Secretary was dropped and I was put in as Member- Secretary.

C.S.Lakshmi: Vinadi you had one year to prepare a very important report. Can you tell us how you went about the process of collecting the material and initiating the whole process of drafting this report?

Vina Mazumdar: Well, a few things had been initiated earlier, because Phulrenudi sent me to participate in the political task force that had been set up before I joined as a member of the committee. I attended one meeting and I went and told Phulrenudi, “You will get nothing from this group because” - I was very rude - I said, “Phulrenudi these are women with political aspirations, they want to get into politics, but they can’t define what is politics. So they haven’t a clue where information is available.” So she said, “How do we go about it?” I said, “Look, listen, there’s a hell of a lot of work that has been done on Indian politics, particularly since independence, there are academics galore who have studied every election since independence. So if we call in their help, at least available research-based information can be gathered.” So she said, “You go now, go now and talk to Naiksaab⁵³⁰.” When I went to Naiksaab, Naiksaab said, “Alright, what do you want?” I said, “I need a working group. I need people like Iqbal to put together what is available. I can’t do it because I have my work in the commission to cope with.” In that working group I just pleaded with people like Iqbal saying that please please undertake the research. They were the survey researchers, they were the ones who had been studying

⁵²⁹ UGC—University Grants Commission, formally established in November 1956 as a statutory body of the Government of India through an Act of Parliament for the coordination, determination and maintenance of standards of university education in India.

⁵³⁰ J. P. Naik (Naiksaab) was a Gandhian who was director of the Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR). *Saab*—(Hindi) respectful form of address—Sir—suffixed after a male name.

elections. So Iqbal said, “Alright, I will go and talk it over with Naiksaab, I will identify people.” But once I became member secretary - Lotikadi (Lotika Sarkar)⁵³¹, Leela Dube⁵³² and myself, plus Kumud Sharma⁵³³ - between the four of us, we drew up a long list of additional research to be done, some of which will be, will require even field level studies — and all in a very short time. That’s the way I wrote the political chapter, you know. I spent three nights, three nights reading the ‘potha’⁵³⁴ which Iqbal had sent and that Sirsakar had sent, and then in one day, fourteen hours non-stop dictation — the chapter got written.

C. S. Lakshmi: Vinadi, what was the nature of the material that was coming in from the field and the women who were involved in drafting this report. What was their perspective towards the material that was coming in?

Vina Mazumdar: You see, the material, the information — there were variations in different states — but the marked difference that we had noticed in Himachal Pradesh⁵³⁵ between what the middle-class women were posing and what the peasant women were saying — there was this marked difference. One tremendous challenge I must tell you that, there was this kisaan⁵³⁶ woman in a village who just stood up and said that, “Go and ask the government of Himachal: Who runs the Himachal economy — the men, or we? Because the majority of the men go off to the plains in search of jobs, or they go to join the army or the police. We do. It is a orchard economy of agriculture — we do all the work. But because of this taboo on our taking up the plough, we have to find, search desperately for hired labour just to engage — sometimes when it becomes difficult, we do operate the plough, but we lose face in the village.” So here was something. When we went to the North-East — Arunachal, Nagaland, Manipur.⁵³⁷ From the educated, urban women — alright, they were working in various offices — clerks, typists, a few doctors, a few teachers — we couldn’t get a word out, only giggles. But the next morning, when we went to the village, the entire village people were lined up in a circle — men, as well as women. And they had put a few chairs for the Committee members and the Home Secretary who was accompanying us and also acting as interpreter. And there was this one woman who came and stood before us. And she came up with these absolute challenges about the threats women faced from the presence of the army, and the Home Secretary was feeling terrible. You know, he was trying to stop her, but she went on. She went on, and there was one young woman standing just next to me - she found the Home Secretary’s translation was wrong. So she shouted up in English, “That’s not what she said. Why are you distorting?” So I called her. I said, “You translate.” She was a primary school teacher. And she translated and she said, “This is what she’s been saying.” Now, we were taking notes. That evening, the three of us, Lotikadi, Urmila (Urmila Haksar)⁵³⁸ and myself, we had a real discussion. And Lotikadi said, “Can you tell me, what this development is all about?” So, Urmila promptly said, “This is something we

⁵³¹ Lotika Sarkar was one of the founder members of CWDS.

⁵³² A pioneer of feminist anthropology and ethnography in India. She has addressed a range of interrelated themes including gender, kinship, caste and culture.

⁵³³ Sociologist at the Centre for Women's Development Studies who has worked extensively on women's issues in India.

⁵³⁴ *potha*—(Bengali) parcel, packet.

⁵³⁵ Himachal Pradesh is a mountainous state in North India.

⁵³⁶ *kisaan*—(Hindi) farmer.

⁵³⁷ Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, and Manipur are state in the northeast corner of India.

⁵³⁸ Author of the Minority Protection and International Bill of Human Rights.

have to [probe], this question has to be posed in the Committee — now a report.” So, this is how the questions were coming off the soil. And much earlier, again it was Urmila — who had in, during one of the discussions of the Committee persuaded — asked to adopt what I have described as a self-denying ordinance — that we are not going to look at feminist literature from the West because ours is a fact-finding exercise and we are going to draw the issues from the soil. So, nobody read anything coming from the West. This self-denying ordinance, as far as I am concerned, still remains. I don’t think... and I’m a supporter of International Women’s Movement, and we have participated in all the debates at the International level — but the kind of, you know, imposition of paradigms from the West that we had to fight in the whole development debate, the same kind of imposition is going on today, and that has to be fought.

C. S. Lakshmi: Vinadi, you had written in one of the articles that all of you had to work literally round the clock to prepare this report because the time was very short... and in the ‘Towards Equality’ Report there’s also a note of dissent. So within the short time of writing the report you’ve also had time to do this note of dissent. So, can you tell us about that note?

Vina Mazumdar: Well, the issue as you know was over this reservation⁵³⁹. Lotika Sarkar and myself, like other members of our generation, had always adopted the position that we want equality — and we want non-discrimination. We do not want special protection, we do not want reservation. That had been our position and the... But, what was coming off the soil — first from political activists — young, women political activists, middle-aged women, from different political parties they said that, “Whenever work has to be done, we are called, but when tickets have to be distributed, you have to be someone’s daughter or someone’s wife or someone’s mistress.” And there was a distinct feeling of resentment amongst the activists, which did not look good for the future. The second was the united position taken by my political science friends who had undertaken these studies. All of them — all of them wrote. And when they sent in their reports, in their introductions, they said clearly that political equality had not brought about real equality because in the political deliberations of the nation, women’s proportion was falling. All these groups combined to recommend very strongly that the Constitution does provide special protection for women if necessary, and we think reservation should be considered. In the Committee, however, there was a very remarkable cleavage. Lalit Sen who was a rural sociologist and he had done an enormous amount of work on our panchayats,⁵⁴⁰ rural politics, social transition, the community development programme. He came and said categorically, he said, “When it comes to what the constitution says about women and about children, there is just no awareness in rural society; that women have been assured any rights under the Constitution is just not there; so something has to be done.” So the Committee agreed to make a recommendation about the introduction of Women’s panchayats — a sort of a conversion of the Mahila Mandal⁵⁴¹ into a different sort of constitutionally, legally protected body as the spokespeople for women’s interests. That recommendation they accepted. When it

⁵³⁹ This is a reference to the reservation of seats held in the Parliament and state legislatures; this reservation is supposed to guarantee that 33 percent of these seats will be occupied by female representatives.

⁵⁴⁰ *panchayats*—literally, rule by 5 representatives, elected at the village-level in India, established post-independence to decentralize power and enable people to achieve legal and political resolutions to local problems.

⁵⁴¹ *Mahila Mandal*—Women’s collectives that have organized at the village level in many states across India to address issues around gender rights. In each village, women from different caste groups come together to share health knowledge and improve their socio-economic status.

came to the State Assemblies⁵⁴² and Parliament⁵⁴³ — flat refusal. Flat refusal of any reservation: “We always opposed reservation, we will.” So at that stage Lotikadi said, “But your position is inconsistent. I too have always opposed reservation for women but I am faced with ground level evidence. I shall be compelled to give a note of dissent.” And I said the same thing — both of us. So that dissent note finally got written only on the very last day. So on 31st December, Lotikadi walked into my room and said, “When are you going to draft that dissent note?” “After this we will.” So she closed the door. She said, “I brought your stenographer, now dictate.” So the dissent note was written like that. We are still plagued by that. My position has also changed. I don’t really give a damn whether the Reservation Bill goes through or not, but my advice to these women’s organisations is don’t allow any tampering with the Bill as it stands.

C.S. Lakshmi: Vinadi what was the impact of the report on all of you and on the nation in general? When they received the report, how did they react to it?

Vina Mazumdar: Well, as far as we ourselves were concerned, I think the three of us — Lotika, Urmila, myself — we were shattered. Shattered and with a definite impact on our self-images, that — how on earth we had remained completely insensitive towards these issues. Because all of us in the drafting committee, we had to face the issue that our educational system itself had been a great contributor to this, what I call intellectual purdah⁵⁴⁴ behind which the lives of the majority of the women had been pushed. But the most major impact was that, “What were we going to do with ourselves?” This questioning - and I pushed it to the back of my mind, “Now there is no time, I have got to finish the report.”

But “Towards Equality”, I am increasingly discovering, did not really reach all that many. Where it did go was — it got sent to the U.N. And certain copies had been taken to the Mexico Conference⁵⁴⁵. And people who managed to pick it up, they went and bombarded the embassies asking for more copies of this report. Within the country, it is the summary which a lot of people read, including, now I think, Mrinal Gore⁵⁴⁶, Pramila Dandavate,⁵⁴⁷ Ahilya Rangnekar —

⁵⁴² State Assemblies—governments at the state level, elected by people of the state, also called Legislative Assembly (*Vidhan Sabha*).

⁵⁴³ Parliament—government at the national level, consisting of two houses—the Upper House (*Rajya Sabha*), whose members are elected by State Assemblies and Lower House (*Lok Sabha*), whose members are elected directly by the people of India.

⁵⁴⁴ *purdah*—(Urdu/Hindi)—literally, curtain; used to mean the veil worn by some Muslim women. Often used colloquially to refer to more general patterns of seclusion.

⁵⁴⁵ The first International Women's World Conference was organized by the United Nations and held in Mexico City in 1975 to promote equal rights for women worldwide.

⁵⁴⁶ Known as a political reformer; as the representative of common people, she has always fought for the issues that affect the everyday life of the ordinary citizens. She became a well-known figure in the politics of Maharashtra because of the active role she played in the Anti-Price Rise Agitation (*Mahagai Virodhi Andolan*).

⁵⁴⁷ Pramila Dandavate—elected as member of the Lok Sabha (Lower House) in Parliament, she championed many women’s movements, among which are campaigns against dowry, sati, and rape, an active presence in the Mathura rape case, the Roop Kanwar case, and responsible in part for new laws motivating inquiries into “accidental deaths” (often dowry deaths) of married women.

the three of them were in jail during the emergency.⁵⁴⁸ And they told me later that we spent the 19 months in jail wading through this Mahakhat.⁵⁴⁹ And they came absolutely charged, but the first question, Mrinal and Ahilya both were in Parliament — ’77 elections — and they said, “We are going to assemble all the women members of Parliament but you and Lotika have to come and explain certain things which nobody understands. The first question, this declining sex ratio what does it mean? What is it?”

In the academic world it percolated slowly, but within a few years, the kind of proposals that the ICSSR⁵⁵⁰ Committee on Women’s Studies began to receive were an indication — it was making an impact. The international impact Lotikadi and I realised in 1976, a year later — both of us had been invited to First International Conference on Women and Development⁵⁵¹ being organised by a group of what you might call Area Studies scholars, feminist scholars — but they were specialists in particular regions, they had worked there, in Wellesley College near Boston. We landed up to find that everybody — a whole lot of people there had read the report and had a lot of questions. Whereas women from other third world countries who had things to say which were very similar to what we had found, they hadn’t had access to the report. So that’s where the Third World alliances were forged and we took the first chance to take the issue before the Non-Aligned (Movement).⁵⁵²

C.S Lakshmi: Vinadi, you have talked about the emergence of a collective conscience, but before that you must have undertaken an individual journey, kind of a personal voyage which should have been there before that. So can you tell us about your growing years in Kolkatta,⁵⁵³ and the early influences in your life?

Vina Mazumdar: Well, since you are a fellow student of history, you picked out the right symbols. I suppose it does feel like a journey but I can’t say that I was conscious at that time.

⁵⁴⁸ Emergency—a state of emergency in India from 26 June 1975 to 21 March 1977, proclaimed by the prime minister at the time, Indira Gandhi. During the emergency, many civil liberties such as the freedom of the press were suspended, and many activists and journalists were jailed. A state of emergency is a period of governance under an altered constitutional setup that can be proclaimed by the President of India, when s/he perceives threats to the nation from internal and external sources or from financial situations of crisis. Under the advice of the cabinet of ministers and using the powers vested in him/her largely by the Part XVIII of the Constitution of India, the President can overrule many provisions of the constitution that guarantee fundamental rights to the citizens of India, and acts governing devolution of powers to the states which form the federation. In the history of independent India, there have been only three periods during which a state of emergency was declared.

⁵⁴⁹ *mahakhat*—(Sanskrit/Hindi)—literally, great epic or in this context, bulky manuscript.

⁵⁵⁰ ICSSR—the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) was established in the year of 1969 by the Government of India to promote research in social sciences in the country.

⁵⁵¹ First International Conference on Women and Development—convened in Mexico City under the aegis of the United Nations to coincide with the 1975 International Women’s Year, observed to remind the international community that discrimination against women continued to be a persistent problem in much of the world.

⁵⁵² Non-Aligned Countries—formed in the 1950s on the initiative of Indian Prime Minister Nehru and then-president of Yugoslavia Tito, as well as Nassar of Egypt and Sukarno of Indonesia. The grouping brought together the states of the world that did not wish to align themselves with either of the Cold War superpowers, the former USSR and the USA. Important members included India, Egypt, and, for a time, the People’s Republic of China. While the organization was intended to be as close an alliance as NATO or the Warsaw Pact, it never had much cohesion and many of its members were induced to or unable to resist aligning with one or another of the great powers.

⁵⁵³ Kolkatta—formerly, Calcutta, capital of West Bengal, a major Indian metropolis (others are New Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Bangalore, and Hyderabad all of which are served by international airports).

It's later, recollecting that I sorted out the early influences, what made a lot of impression, and the pure love of history helped. I was born into a middle-class Bengali family. I was born in Calcutta in 1927. But the family was very used to being a migrant household because my father worked on the nursing and harnessing of rivers and so he was all the time being shunted, being moved, from one place to another. So my mother had spent 11 years in the South, picked up a fair amount of Telugu, Tamil and Kannada⁵⁵⁴ and I suppose she had, by the standards of those days, she had a much more varied exposure. She was certainly the strongest influence on my growing-up period.

C.S.Lakshmi: Vinadi, you mentioned your father. What kind of a person was he?

Vina Mazumdar: My father was again a mixture. He was a scientist, he became a civil engineer, determined to learn how to reduce the ravages of floods. And, at the same time, he thought of himself as a very traditional Indian of that generation. What made me tremendously proud and left a very deep impression was his decision to take premature retirement in 1942, when he received orders to collaborate with the army in mining all the dams and embankments in East Bengal,⁵⁵⁵ which he had helped to build. So he went straight from that meeting to his office, wrote out an application seeking premature retirement with immediate effect.

C.S.Lakshmi: 1942 was an important year, and in your family with the decision your father had taken — what were you in 1942? Were you in school or had you completed school?

Vina Mazumdar: I had just finished school and appeared for my — what was called-matriculation⁵⁵⁶ of those days. One of my cousins was going to Ashutosh College⁵⁵⁷ to take part in some student protests and I went along with her. And that was the first induction to taking part in student politics. After that, the other steps came very easily — getting elected as the Secretary of the students' union of the Girls' section of the college. And in the late '40s, most of us were out taking part in some demonstration or another. There was something or the other going on all the time — some days the INA trials⁵⁵⁸ started and Calcutta University colleges poured, students poured out, completely. So these... finding an opportunity to take bigger students from my college to go and have a look at the Mahatama⁵⁵⁹ who came in the middle of all this — he was staying just outside Calcutta. A lot of excitement. But one interesting memory which surfaced much, much later — and when I checked it with other student activists, whether my memory was

⁵⁵⁴ Telugu, Tamil, Kannada—three of the four major South Indian languages, spoken by majorities in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka, respectively. In the south Indian state of Kerala, Malayalam is the official language.

⁵⁵⁵ East Bengal—formerly part of Bengal. After partition in 1947 (following independence from the British), it became part of East Pakistan. In 1971, after several years of civil war, became the separate country of Bangladesh.

⁵⁵⁶ matriculation—one of three systems of high school education in India; refers to a final high school exam (in the 10th grade), after which one is eligible for admission to an undergraduate program.

⁵⁵⁷ Ashutosh College is located in Kolkata, West Bengal and was founded by Sir Asutosh Mookherjee in 1916. The institute was upgraded to a Degree College in 1918-19. Following the sad demise of Sir Asutosh on May 24, 1924, the college was renamed as Ashutosh College under the presidency of his son, Dr. Shyamaprasad Mookherjee.

⁵⁵⁸ Indian National Army—formed in January 1942 through the efforts of Subash Chandra Bose; announced by the Propaganda Ministry in Berlin where Bose traveled for mobilization and support.

⁵⁵⁹ Literally “great spirit”; used as a title of respect for a person renowned for spirituality and high-mindedness. Here she is referring to Mohandas Gandhi.

strong enough or whether they had... You see, there were three common slogans ‘Azaad Hindustan ki Jai’, ‘Chattra Ekta Zindabad’, ‘Stree Swadheenata Zindabad.’⁵⁶⁰

C.S.Lakshmi: Vinadi, Can you tell us something about your Oxford experience?

Vina Mazumdar: Sure. The first, first major experience was the jump in confidence and losing the fear of the unfamiliar. Because I had never been away from the family and because I was the youngest in the family, everybody – all the brothers, sisters, parents – there was a, there was a kind of protective attitude, and outside the immediate family, in this big extended family again there, I was the... I was a kid, kid cousin you see. But finding myself waiting for a train to Oxford in Paddington, I felt so paralysed with fear. I just didn’t know what I was going to do. In this whole country there isn’t a soul I know. But, it was, educationally, it was a very rewarding experience, a very rewarding experience. Three years went by quite quickly and I came back. I came back just after the Constitution had been adopted and India had become a Republic.

C.S.Lakshmi: Vinadi, you said that when you came back the constitution was already adopted. So, in 1947 when India attained independence, were you in Delhi then?

Vina Mazumdar: Oh yes, from ’46 onwards, I had gone to Delhi to join my father and that’s where I sat for all those entrance exams to Oxford. As a result, we escaped the great Calcutta killing of ’46⁵⁶¹ but managed to be very much present at the midnight session of Parliament,⁵⁶² transfer of power, and heard Jawaharlal’s⁵⁶³ great speech. Prior to that, I did sit in the visitors’ gallery. Quite a few days I [had been] listening to the Constituent Assembly debates and so full of the sort of euphoria. I have very vivid memories of the 15th of August. My father woke me up early morning and said, “Come for a walk, don’t you want to see the Union Jack coming down and the tricolour going up?” So we went, walked to India Gate and saw the flag being changed. And then, these masses of people outside the Parliament building after the morning session on the 15th — 14th night had been the midnight session and 15th morning was the formal session. And I sat on the bonnet of our car watching this sea of humanity — a lot of excitement.

C.S.Lakshmi: What happened after you returned from Oxford? You said you wanted to teach...

Vina Mazumdar: I first talked to my mother and she said “Go and talk to your father.” So with a lot of trepidation, I went — and asked him, “I want to apply for a teaching job.” So he looked at me and said, “Well, that was understood.” I looked rather blank, so he laughed. He said, “Look, when I agreed to your going to Oxford, I knew this day would come. So I was prepared. In the

⁵⁶⁰ Long Live Free India, Long Live Student Unity, Long Live Women’s Independence.

⁵⁶¹ Great Calcutta killing of 1946—The Muslim League in then-Bengal called for “Direct Action Day,” on 16 August, 1946, to secure its demand for Pakistan. There was considerable inter-communal killing.

⁵⁶² Midnight session of Parliament—refers to Jawaharlal Nehru’s “Tryst With Destiny” speech at the midnight of August 14/15, 1947, when the British formally handed over political control to India and Pakistan, which was declared a separate Muslim country. Nehru was selected to be the first Prime Minister of independent India and Mohammad Jinnah the first Prime Minister of Pakistan.

⁵⁶³ Jawaharlal Nehru, also called Pandit (“Teacher”) Nehru, was the leader of the socialist wing of the Indian National Congress during and after India’s struggle for independence from Britain. He became the first Prime Minister of India at independence on August 15, 1947, holding the office until his death in 1964.

meantime, something else has happened. The country has adopted a new Constitution which tells me I cannot discriminate between you and your brothers and since I have always told them that my job ends with providing them with some education, and after that their life's decisions must be their own, the same thing applies to you. So, go ahead and apply and I am very happy that you want to teach rather than go into..." - go and sit for the competitive exams which my brothers were pressing me to do. So, I started applying and I did get an offer from Baroda University.⁵⁶⁴ My father was a bit unhappy. He said, "It is so far away." I was not quite well, so I'd asked for one month's joining time. Suddenly in the middle of that month, quite unexpectedly, the Patna University — they had invited me for the interview and I had not gone — because it was very hot. I was not well and people told me, "Nobody's going to give you a job in Bihar."⁵⁶⁵ You are a Bengali,⁵⁶⁶ you are a woman and you are young, so on three counts, *nahi milega*⁵⁶⁷." But anyway, I did get to Patna, the Vice Chancellor had a final meeting with me and the job was offered. So I joined in the middle of 1951 and I quit that University only in 1965 when I came to...came to the University Grants Commission.

C.S.Lakshmi: Vinadi, I think the years between 1951 and the time when you were appointed member of the Committee For The Status Of Women In India are very important years in your life. Because those are years when you make a lot of moves from one place to another and that is also the time when you got married and you set up a family and other things. So, can you tell us something about your joining Patna University to teach, because at that time you still wanted to teach?

Vina Mazumdar: Yes...no, I certainly wanted to teach and I suppose I was looking for an independent life. And the changes that took place in the '50s, you know, they sort of came one on top of the other. They were all very rapid and they made deep changes in my life but that does not mean the teaching faded into the backgrounds. I enjoyed. The first great change of course — apart from my marriage and the arrival of the first two daughters — was the departure, in rapid succession — between '56 and '59, I lost my father, I lost my mother-in-law, who loved me enormously, and then my mother. So, when I try to think back to the '50s, it is the feeling of being bereft — you know, being left to fend for myself. And that's why I think the opportunity to go back to Oxford for a hard stint of work, more because I felt that if I were staying in this profession, I have to do some solid work. And, but I was compelled to take the kids along with me because the two mothers had departed.

C. S. Lakshmi: Vinadi, when did you return from Oxford?

Vina Mazumdar: '62. I was out for exactly two years. I came back to find my department — all the old seniors who had been so friendly, so beneficent, let me say — they had all gone and the atmosphere of the new department was very different to what it had been earlier. Also, the last pair of kids also arrived. But by that time, the first two had grown up a bit, so they shared — they shared a great deal of the rearing responsibilities along with their father.

⁵⁶⁴ Baroda is a city in western India.

⁵⁶⁵ Bihar—state in North India.

⁵⁶⁶ Bengali—language spoken by the majority in the state of West Bengal.

⁵⁶⁷ *nahi milega*— (Hindi) "will not get (something)."

The Education Commission had just started functioning in 1964 and that was when I was realising that I must get out of Patna University. I couldn't continue. So this, it seemed to be a good idea, that this is the time when it would be a good thing to go there. Whatever comes out of this commission, there would be measures for reform. And it coincided with Shankra's plan. He wanted a little more time to devote to his training. So I sent off an application. I wanted a hand in it. So that way, the UGC under D.S. Kothari proved to be an even... I would say that [an] even more powerful learning experience than Oxford had been. I was finding out for the first time what India was all about. Much more than I had known. So — challenging, exciting but very hard work, very strenuous. I lost 40 pounds in three years after joining the UGC without any volition on my part — '*apne se chalogaya*.'⁵⁶⁸ So an offer of a two-year fellowship from Simla Institute to work on Education and Social Change was very welcome.

But before I had been in Simla more than two months, comes an offer of a Chair from the University of Behrampur in Orissa, appointed in-absentia. So, I still couldn't make up my mind. I came down to Delhi. So finally I landed up with D.S. Kothari⁵⁶⁹. I said, "Sir, I don't have a father left. In all such situations, ultimately, it was my father who helped me to make up my mind, so I've come to you." He said, "Now, you have really put me into a difficult situation. I can't advise you as the Chairman, UGC. I have to advise you as your father's substitute. I think you should give the new university a trial."

Before two years were out, the same D.S. Kothari says, "If you want to come back, come back now. Because I have a senior post which you should have had a long time earlier, but now, I have a vacancy there, so now you come." I couldn't... again, what to do? How to make up my mind? No father figures there. So that's when I went to that astrologer.

C.S.Lakshmi: Vinadi, you must tell us about going to the astrologer and what happened afterwards?

Vina Mazumdar: Well, he just helped me to make up my mind, you see, because I was not getting any help from any other source. By telling me that if you don't go, things will go badly for your children. There was no question of... so straight to the telegraph office from his house and I sent off a message to the Secretary of the UGC that I will be joining on the 2nd of May. But just before leaving Behrampur, this letter from the Education Ministry came saying that you have been appointed to this Committee on the Status of Women in India. Now, when I came back to Delhi and rejoined the UGC, I didn't even remember about this committee, of the sending of an acceptance. But in less than a year-and-a-half from my return, I suddenly found myself Member Secretary of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, something to which, till just six months earlier, I had not attached any importance.

C.S.Lakshmi: Vinadi you spoke very beautifully about how your personal life got more and more linked with the work that you were doing. Earlier you had spoken about this

⁵⁶⁸ *apne se chalogaya*—(Hindi) "went away on its own."

⁵⁶⁹ Dr. D.S. Kothari is a physicist and astrophysicist. He is well known for research on the ionization of matter by pressure in cold compact objects such as planets.

“collective consciousness” that all of you had developed at the end of the “Towards Equality” project or during the process of that... Now what happened after that? What was the follow-up after the “Towards Equality” report that you wrote which you say radically altered your life?

Vina Mazumdar: I needed a break, so I went to visit my brother at Shantiniketan.⁵⁷⁰ I took leave for one month. And while there, Emergency was declared and I received a prompt summons from Naiksaab, “Comeback.” So it was Naiksaab who really thought up the follow-up, not me. He was looking absolutely bleak...you remember how fair he was. He was literally looking dark. After a few seconds he resumed and said “They have changed the nature of the polity, I don’t know whether we can ever get back.” And then suddenly as if he had drawn new inspiration from somewhere, he looked up and said, “Well let us focus on women. Go and write a policy paper for a research programme focusing on poor women. I don’t think the powers that be will understand the political significance, at least not just as yet, because I don’t think we will be permitted to do much else. So write down, write down now, write a policy paper. Why such a programme, what should it investigate.... So Kumud and I put our heads together, worked on this — consulted Lotikadi at some stage, consulted Prof. Mitra and that was the inception of the ICSSR’s programme of Women’s Studies. Absolutely on the backdrop of the Emergency. It was a direct outcome.

C.S.Lakshmi: Is this how the CWDS⁵⁷¹ was set up? After this the CWDS.

Vina Mazumdar: No, no,no,no,no...CWDS does not come into existence until 1980, my dear. I am still talking about 1975 — the declaration of emergency. Through the Emergency, we concentrated on trying to get studies done on the five areas that we had identified. It was only in ’79 that the committee — the Advisory Committee in charge — adopted a resolution which went to the ICSSR recommending the setting up of an autonomous institution to carry on the seminal work that this programme has initiated. The resolution was drafted jointly by Ashok Mitra and Justice Krishna Iyer.⁵⁷²

It went to the government, and one of the things that Mrs Gandhi had done during the Emergency was to constitute a National Committee to do justice to Women, which never met through the 19 months of the Emergency. The Janata government⁵⁷³ came, that Committee was reconstituted. It met only once and did nothing. But Rajkrishna in the Planning Commission

⁵⁷⁰ *Shantiniketan*—(Sanskrit)—literally, abode of peace; an International University that focuses on the arts, which was founded in West Bengal by Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore with a view to let “the cultures of the East & the West meet and mingle.”

⁵⁷¹ CWDS—Centre for Women’s Development Studies in New Delhi, established in 1980 (see website at <http://www.cwds.org/>).

⁵⁷² Justice Krishna Iyer—Credited with a Supreme Court decision that allowed Indira Gandhi to remain in power as Prime Minister despite highly controversial circumstances, leading to her declaration of Emergency on June 26, 1975.

⁵⁷³ Janata was formed in 1977 to fight Indira Gandhi. It united socialists, Lohia-ites, old Congressmen, rural notables and the Jan Sangh. From the time it took office in March 1977, it soon became clear that there were really two parties struggling to get out from under the Janata name: the Jan Sangh and the rest. Eventually, the Janata government collapsed in 1979, over the issue of dual membership (of the RSS as well as Janata). There was the old Janata, represented most visibly by Chandra Shekhar, its President, and there was the Jan Sangh version, headed by A. B. Vajpayee.

was trying to help, so the Ministry of Social Welfare was negotiating with other ministries to get some support. Again, 1980 election comes.

Well, you know what happened in the 1980 elections⁵⁷⁴. So, a small group — Naiksaab, Ashok Mitra, Lotika Sarkar, myself - we met. What happens now? Naiksaab said, “So Vina, draw up a Constitution. Take a copy of the Registration of Societies Act and there’s a model provided, you can sort of fill in all the material. I will be coming two weeks later, I’ll help you finalise that. So, Ashok, we will meet in two weeks time. Vina will have the Draft Constitution ready, because we have to formalise that decision, and then we will register.” I said, “Naiksaab, *ek paisa ka provision nahi hai, aap kehte ho*.⁵⁷⁵ And he looked at me, he said, “Good work that needs to be done never gets held up for lack of resources, only lack of determination.” So, I said, “Alright, a mantra.⁵⁷⁶” It took some time to absorb, so, by April 1980, the registration was through and Naiksaab had organised a grant from the Vikram Sarabhai Foundation – you know who was responsible. The same person was already working on the Ford Foundation, Kamala – and told me, “Don’t worry, don’t worry. It will take a little time, but the Foundation is quite committed to supporting your venture.” The other hope of support was from the ILO⁵⁷⁷ Rural Employment Policies Branch. So that...those were the sort of assurances. But Naiksaab, as soon as this Sarabhai foundation’s message was there, he said, “Now you can afford to go and hire a building.” So I hired a building and we started off. It took nearly the full year for the Ford Grant or the I.L.O grants to be cleared by the Bharat Sarkar.⁵⁷⁸

Now, Nirmala Buch as the representative of the government of India was a member of the ICSSR Committee on Women’s Studies so she had been a party to that resolution recommending the setting up of an autonomous institution. In 19... towards the up... she was just returning from Copenhagen, the mid-decade conference and she came and said, “All the exercises that we did for three solid years, everything is being chucked — declared as junk — what do we do now? How do we save these ideas? How do we ensure that some of this gets into...” because the Janata plan was sort of thrown into the junk heap; a new panning commission under the chairmanship of M.S. Swaminathan⁵⁷⁹ had come into existence. So what is [to be done]? Now by that time, I had learnt a few things from Naiksaab. I said, “My dear, this is where you, the

⁵⁷⁴ In 1980 Indira Gandhi was voted back into power by a landslide vote, less than three years after the electorate rejected her "emergency dictatorship." Her Congress (Indira) party had won 351 of the 525 contested seats in the lower house of parliament, virtually wiping out her party's two major contenders. Neither the Janata nor the Lok Dal party gained the requisite 54 seats to qualify for recognition as the official opposition.

⁵⁷⁵ “*ek paisa ka provision nahi hai, aap kehte ho*”—(Hindi) translated, it literally means “[But] you are saying that there is no provision for a single penny!”

⁵⁷⁶ *mantra*—(Sanskrit) word that has passed into English; a sacred chant; anything that is repeated and held sacred by somebody.

⁵⁷⁷ I.L.O.—International Labor Organization, established in 1919 after World War I, following the Treaty of Versailles. India, though not yet an independent country, was one of the founding members of the ILO and has been a permanent member of the ILO Governing Body since 1922.

⁵⁷⁸ *Bharat Sarkar*—(Hindi) Indian government or Government of India.

⁵⁷⁹ Professor M S Swaminathan has been acclaimed for his work as a plant geneticist and his contributions to the agricultural renaissance of India. His advocacy of sustainable agriculture leading to an ever-green revolution makes him an acknowledged world leader in the field of sustainable food security. The International Association of Women and Development conferred on him the first international award for significant contributions to promoting the knowledge, skill, and technological empowerment of women in agriculture and for his pioneering role in mainstreaming gender considerations in agriculture and rural development.

bureaucrat, and Vina the academic bows out. Because this is not something...you want noise, so you need a mobilisation. This is where we turn to the National Women's Organisations who picked up the dowry⁵⁸⁰ issue, picked up the dowry violence issue, picked up the Mathura case⁵⁸¹ issue. These are the people who can mobilise public opinion." So the two of us called up the National Women's Organisations, six of them, and they were kind enough to include the CWDS as a sister organisation, and the...this group met in the office of the Y.W.C.A of India, because Ivy Khan⁵⁸² took a lot of interest. There was a seminar using all those documents which had been put together in the Planning Commission or in the Agriculture Ministry, and the outcome of that seminar — they summoned Dr. Swaminathan to the afternoon session. So Swaminathan came. The Press was very well represented, it was a sight — Aruna Asaf Ali⁵⁸³ standing with her white hair flying, "Swaminathan, how dare you? How dare you reject all these ideas? They had been recommended by official committees constituted by the Government of India. How dare you throw them into the waste paper basket? We will not have it!" It was a fantastic sight. That's the inception of the Seven Sisters⁵⁸⁴.

C.S.Lakshmi: Vinadi can you tell us something about — how the Indian Association of Women's Studies was formed and why it was necessary at that time to form this association?

Vina Mazumdar: In 1980, sometime in 1980, just after the CWDS came into existence, Hemlata Swaroop had become the new Vice-Chancellor of Kanpur University. Once she became Vice-Chancellor, she wanted to do something in the Kanpur University. So she came to Delhi and she talked to me and I said, "Alright, invite Naiksaab, invite a few others, Mrs Buch also." And we met. In that meeting Naiksaab said, "Now we need, you need a national association. If you want to promote Women's Studies within the country, you need a national association. But the best way of going about that is to convene a National Conference, first on Women's Studies — I am sure, Nirmala, the Bharat Sarkar will provide some assistance." He said, "We will have a national committee to convene this conference. And the best person to be Chair of that

⁵⁸⁰ dowry—the system where a 'bride price' is given to the groom. This can range from gifts of money to homes, automobiles, etc. Demands for dowries in cash or kind increased dramatically in the 1980s, as did the phenomenon of 'dowry deaths' or murders during that period.

⁵⁸¹ Mathura case—the notorious case in March 1972. Mathura, a 16-year-old tribal girl from Chandrapur district, Maharashtra, was raped by two policemen on duty at the police station where she was taken by her brothers for attempting to elope with her lover. The Supreme Court overturned a High Court decision that the accused officers be imprisoned for seven years on the technicality of no struggle and the fact that Mathura was already sexually experienced. The shocking verdict caused women's groups around the nation to organize around the issue of rape and justice for women.

⁵⁸² Former National General Secretary of the YWCA of India.

⁵⁸³ Aruna Asaf Ali came to be known as the 'Grand old Lady of the Independence Movement' and the Heroine of the 1942 Movement.' Aruna Asaf Ali's first major political involvement was during Gandhi's "Salt March" (part of his long-term Satyagraha, or "Truth force," campaign), when she addressed public meetings and led processions. She also worked in the local women's league, which was affiliated to the All India Women's Conference. In 1954 she helped to establish the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW), the women's wing of the Communist Party of India. The NFIW was meant to be a radical alternative to existing women's organizations, and one that would reach beyond a middle class membership. The country honoured her with its highest civilian award, the Bharat Ratna.

⁵⁸⁴ The Seven Sisters is a group of women's organizations that collaborated in addressing ongoing women's rights issues in India.

Convening Committee is Madhuri Shah, Vice-Chancellor, SNTD Women's University,⁵⁸⁵ which is the only institution today which has this research centre focussing on these issues." And out of this national conference, you get a mandate to form an association. That is the democratic approach. That's the way we pushed off. And we knew we could tap UNICEF, we knew we could tap Ford Foundation, some support will be available. So this was decided. So the conference was convened and out of that came the resolution forming the Association.

In '85, several of us were invited to a bi-national seminar on Women's Studies in the United States. You remember, what was it — the Festival of India that year. And we met at Sara Lawrence College. And many of my friends that I had made over the '70s and the early '80s in the Women's Studies world in the United States were there. In that seminar, we were told by the principal of Sara Lawrence College, she said, "You know, you people were much brighter than my colleagues. You took the stand that Women's Studies is not a discipline." She knew the entire story. "You decided that it was a perspective which needed to be incorporated in all the other Social Science disciplines." She said, "Yours was, that kind of legitimacy that you were able to organize. I wish we had thought of that earlier."

C. S. Lakshmi: Vinadi, this recording will be incomplete if I don't ask you about the Bankura project in West Bengal that CWDS has taken up. It's very close to your heart and you have written a lot about it and you have spoken a lot about it. So, can you tell us just little about it?

Vina Mazumdar: Well, this is the I.L.O. Project which I mentioned earlier. Soon after the Centre came into existence, I went to West Bengal, to talk to the only civil servant there whom I knew, that was, Debabrata Bandopadhyay, who had gone back to West Bengal as Land Reforms Commissioner, and was organising this operation, Barga camps⁵⁸⁶. Bandopadhyaya had noticed a tremendous increase in the number of women and children on these periodic treks and they all looked half-starved and the children looked even worse. Babies in arms. And when he had asked questions from district-level officer, the only answers he got in reply was that, "Yes, there is an increase, possibly because they want to go to Hoogly⁵⁸⁷ and Burdwan where they can also shop,

⁵⁸⁵ S.N.D.T. Women's University—started in 1916 by Dhondo Keshav Karve as Indian Women's University at Pune with an enrolment of five students. In 1920, Sir Vithaldas Thackersey, an eminent industrialist and philanthropist of Mumbai who was also committed to the cause of women's education, offered a generous gift that became a turning point for the University. The University was renamed Shreemati Nathibai Damodar Thackersey Indian Women's University in memory of his mother. In 1936, the University shifted its headquarters to Mumbai. In 1951, the University was granted statutory recognition and from then on came to be known as Shreemati Nathibai Damodar Thackersey (SNTD) Women's University. Gradually, as the University progressed to newer heights, the acronym "SNTD" became popular and began to signify educational endeavours for women. Today, these letters - "SNTD" - have become a symbolic logo for excellent higher educational opportunities for women. (See website at <http://www.sndt.org/>)

⁵⁸⁶ Barga camps—part of the land reforms initiative in the state of West Bengal in which the sharecroppers who cultivated land (*bargadar*) but were indentured to landlords (*zamindars* or *jotedars*) were registered as actual cultivators and provisions were made to distribute surplus land among them, rather than keep control in the hands of landlords who exploited the indentured sharecroppers. The camps for such registration by ILO representatives were called Barga camps.

⁵⁸⁷ Hoogly—river and city in West Bengal, across the river from Kolkatta (Calcutta). The city is the site of a "factory" (warehouse and base) set up by the East India Company in 1640. Along the river there is a concentration of factories, which process cotton, rice, and jute, and manufacture rubber goods and chemicals. Hooghly was

and where they can see some cinema. Its not there in Bankura. They have no access to such things.” So it was against that backdrop, he had decided to hold this camp... During the three days of that camp, I was able to inform Ashok Mitra and Bandopadhyay that there is an old woman in that group who was sitting and, sort of, going on talking to herself in Santhali.⁵⁸⁸ And I managed to get one of the other women who spoke Bangla more fluently that, “Can you tell me what she is saying?” And this old woman had linked up the whole cause of the decline in their situation with deforestation. “The forest gave us food, fodder, fuel as well as a livelihood. When they cut down the forests, they took away all these things and so we have to go on these perpetual treks just to save the children and those whom we try to save, we lose half of them in the process of these treks.” So this kind of information began to surface in their internal discussions before the camp even started.

And, that itself became another learning process, and before the camp ended, Benoy Choudhary, the Land Reforms Minister who was there right through listening, he called me, and he said, “Ashok Mitra tells me that you are coming to West Bengal to take up some kind of a project on rural women and you are looking for a location. *Aar Kothai Jabey, didi?*⁵⁸⁹ This is where you start. You have just seen what condition these women are in. Where else will you go, sister? So make a beginning with this.”

So we began as assistance, to assist them, and it ended up as a partnership — and it is mutual learning, mutual empowerment process. That’s why I regarded that project always as my battery recharge. When I feel too jaded and sort of creeping, creeping hopelessness and powerlessness, I used to rush off there. It is still on, it has expanded — they have demonstrated their capacities, they have become some kind of a power in that region. And for the last seven years, I have been, with their help, I have been promoting similar groups in the neighbouring district, Medinipur. It’s been a very, very rewarding experience, which I have certainly described as a mutual empowerment process. Its not just the CWDS helping the women to empower themselves, but in the process this partnership has helped many in the CWDS to empower themselves, and first of all, me.

Lakshmi: Vinadi, we have come a long way from the ‘Towards Equality’ report and a lot many things have happened since then. What do you think of the women’s movement in India at this point of time?

Vina Mazumdar: I would say that like many other efforts from the people’s side, the movement has taken some beating through the ’90s, but its grassroots base has, in fact, expanded from the same ’90s. The same causes have produced both the effects. Some fragmentation of organisations, some jargonisation, - impact of globalised terminology entering Women’s Studies. But the same process is strengthening the expansion of the grassroots base. I wouldn’t dare to predict for the 21st century because I am basically a 20th century person. I can only hope that in the same way that I hoped that the people of India will cope with all these challenges and rise to

originally founded by the Portuguese in 1537. In 1651 it became the first English settlement in lower Bengal, while in nearby Chinsura the Dutch set up a trading post in 1656.

⁵⁸⁸ Santhali—language and name of tribal people in West Bengal.

⁵⁸⁹ *aar kothay jabey, didi*—(Bengali) where else would we go, *didi*. *Didi*, respectful form of address for an older sister or more generally while addressing women who are older in one’s society or community

the occasion, I have the same kind of hope from the women of India. You people have to carry on.

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS:
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: INDIA

**Transcript of D. Sharifa
Interviewer: C.S. Lakshmi**

Location: Pudukkottai, Tamilnadu, India

Date: 9-12 July, 2004

Language of Interview: Tamil



SPARROW

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D. Sharifa, born in 1966, is a much-talked about person in Tamilnadu and among activists because of the stand she has taken on Muslim women's rights. She runs an organisation called STEPS at Pudukottai, Tamilnadu. The organisation was started because Sharifa strongly felt that there was a need to make women aware of their rights. Her initial action based programmes dealt with problems as they came to her. Most of the problems she dealt with arose from the politics of everyday life. After a research study she did in 1995, Sharifa decided to concentrate on the needs of Muslim women because she felt that this was a much neglected area. For the past few years Sharifa has been fighting to build a mosque for Muslim women that would provide a space for them to both pray and discuss the issues of their life and act as a community centre. Sharifa has received several national awards for her work among women.

C.S. Lakshmi (the interviewer) is a researcher in Women's Studies and a Tamil writer who writes under the pseudonym Ambai. She is currently the Director of SPARROW (Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women).

D. Sharifa Transcript

Lakshmi: Sharifa, I have known you for many years. But now I have got a chance to document your life and your work. So I want to know about your childhood. Where were you born and brought up? What memories do you have?

Sharifa: I was born in Kulithalai⁵⁹⁰. My mother was a head mistress in the school there. I was born there. We lived there until I was three years old. All that I remember is that the toilet was outside and a dog would be sitting there. I would think that it is guarding me. When I used to get up in the morning, I would see jasmine flowers and almonds that my mother would collect and keep near the pillow. That's my memory of Kulithalai when I was three or four. Another memory is of my father removing the thread that was tied around my waist. This is all I remember. Then my mother worked in Manapparai⁵⁹¹. My childhood days were spent in Manapparai and it was wonderful. Many things happened — to this day I recall my childhood period as the happiest period of my life. We would play, cook food, go out, laugh and have fun, pluck the fruits of tamarind tree...

Lakshmi: How many children were you?

Sharifa: I was the tenth child in my house. My mother brought us up with a lot of love. Not too many restrictions as such. She never compelled me to observe purdah⁵⁹² like my elder sister. But when I was growing, when I was in fourth or fifth [grade], one of my elder brothers committed suicide. (...)

My elder sister was widowed within two years of marriage. My brother could not bear to see my mother single-handedly bringing up a large family and he committed suicide.

Lakshmi: Didn't your father support you?

Sharifa: My father — in fact, he had done his B.A. But when I was growing up, when my father came home I would get scared. He will quarrel with my mother and beat her.

So after I was born, my mother decided that it was not possible to live with my father. My father was staying with his younger brother in Trichy we were in Manapparai. He would come once in 6 months or once in a year and the very news that he was coming would evoke fear in us.

When he came home — one should not say this— but the whole house would be like a cemetery. We would all be quiet. We feared him so much. But my mother made up for all that we lacked. (...)

⁵⁹⁰ Kulithalai is located in Tamil Nadu, a region on the Southern most tip of India. Tamil Nadu is the second most industrialized state in India.

⁵⁹¹ Manapparai : Another city located in Tamil Nadu.

⁵⁹² *purdah*—(Urdu/Hindi)—literally, curtain; used to mean the veil worn by some Muslim women. Often used colloquially to refer to more general patterns of seclusion.

My mother raised ten children with difficulty as a single mother. On the one hand, she had to maintain the atmosphere at home. On the other, fulfil all our needs but also keep us strictly under discipline. For example, where food was concerned we could only eat four idlis⁵⁹³ or three dosais⁵⁹⁴. We all had a similar plate. We will all sit in a row with the plates in front of us. Suppose we had one week holiday, we would each of us carry some vegetable and she will take us to her mother's house. She did not want us to feel that we did not have clothes like others. She was a good seamstress. With no money, she stitched clothes herself for us. At times, there would be no rice to eat for lunch. There have been days when she used to take the first bus at 6 o'clock, collect the money at 11 and come back and cook and feed us before 12 noon. She brought us up with a lot of care.

Now, if you see my school education, I was not a very talented girl. My handwriting was terrible. But the school was well-known for its discipline. There was no other go but to study. I have already told you we did not study with any great interest. We studied because otherwise we would get a beating from the nuns; they will make us kneel. When I was in 10th, we had to stay in the hostel for three months and study night and day. There was no other go. So I managed to pass 10th Standard. And if I had not done it, it is doubtful if I could have studied further. My school was very close to my house. And since my mother was firm about educating us, she admitted my elder sister, my other sisters and me in the school.

My childhood was enjoyable. Only my father's entry kind of spoilt it. Then after Plus 2 (12th standard) I joined college. After Plus 2, they put me in college.

Lakshmi: Where did you do your higher studies?

Sharifa: I did my 10th and Plus 2 in a local Christian school. My brothers felt that we never carried the Muslim identity. They wanted us to show more interest in Islam from then on to know more about Islam and our culture. So in North I joined Aligarh Muslim University⁵⁹⁵. My brother was doing his M.Tech⁵⁹⁶ in Kanpur⁵⁹⁷.

Lakshmi: Did you do any Diploma course?

Sharifa: Yes, I did my Diploma in Office Management.

Lakshmi: How long was the course?

Sharifa: I studied for three years. It was not such a good experience...just went to college. But I got an opportunity to be on my own.

Lakshmi: Your world would have expanded to an extent, isn't it? But by now you were no longer a girl from a small town isn't it? Your world had widened.

⁵⁹³ A breakfast item or snack. Small round dumpling made of rice and dal.

⁵⁹⁴ Dosas are a thin, crispy, golden brown rice and lentil pancake.

⁵⁹⁵ Famous Muslim university in Aligarh, a region in North India.

⁵⁹⁶ M. Tech: Masters of Technology.

⁵⁹⁷ Kanpur: A industrial city in the north of India.

Sharifa: Definitely. It was while I was in this college that my father passed away. We had gone home on leave. My father was unwell. It was here that my mother...we don't deserve to call ourselves feminists...to that extent she could...I think about it now. We had gone home for holidays. My mother was also unwell so my father was in the hospital. After the holidays, we returned because we didn't want to lose attendance. I returned.

I went to the college. After about 15 or 20 days, I get a letter from my mother. A post card. She writes, "After you left — My dear daughter, You went away many days ago and why haven't you written? Don't you know I will get worried? How can you be so careless? How are you faring in your studies? Are you eating properly?" And then, in the eleventh line, "Your father died on such and such a date. Then, as usual, "Study well. Have you paid your exam fees?" and so on. I began crying soon as I read it. (...)

In my life, from my childhood, there was no stage when I was comfortable with either my father or brother. They may want to see a film. Suddenly he would plan. 'There is a Tamil film let's go!' Just half an hour before, he would suddenly tell us to get ready and take us. Whether we like it or not. Or tell us to go around Delhi. He would put on Tamil songs. He would bring a radio. They would do what they wanted. Not allow us to do what we wanted. So I could not evolve. With no outside exposure I could not evolve. It was this way, even after my father's death — but I have not seen my mother, with a thali⁵⁹⁸, or any jewellery. But for her earnings, no other jewellery. Not in my entire life. My childhood was like this. (...)

Lakshmi: Sharifa, after you finished your graduation, did you want to do post-graduation or did you think of taking up a job or starting a business of your own?

Sharifa: I wanted to take up a job, Madam. Because, I was with my elder brother in Chandigarh then. He was working in R.E.C. College⁵⁹⁹. He looked upon us as a burden. I completed my college studies at Delhi, at Aligarh Muslim University. Our mental growth was nil. We were like what we used to be at home. Even though we were at Chandigarh we could not step out of the house. We peeped outside only when our brother left the house. He was so strict. When I look back at the incidents there, it seems that we were considered a burden and solely dependent on him. Each incident seemed to mirror this feeling. Even sitting, standing, eating—even that was not of our own volition. Whatever they said we did. The atmosphere was not conducive to speaking out openly even our normal feelings. So the desire to come out and take up a job was within me. I was looking for an opportunity. Mother was staying with us. My elder sister was also there. Another sister's son was also living with us. My elder brother was newly married then. All of us seemed like a big responsibility to him. So, there was always a feeling of alienation. All I wanted to do was to leave this place. So the first step for that was to take up a job. There would be quarrels or confrontations every day. At that time, my mother came back to Tamilnadu, looking for a suitable alliance for my elder sister. She wanted me to settle down in the North. I was very attached to my mother. Also, I felt restricted; I was just not myself. I was

⁵⁹⁸ Thali: the wedding chain in traditional Hindu wedding ceremony that the groom ties around the bride's neck. It is also called mangalsutra and is symbolically akin to the exchange of rings in western weddings. Gold and silver are the only metals used and pendant is generally cast in a few traditional shapes.

⁵⁹⁹ R.E.C.= Regional Engineering College, Chandigarh is a city in northern India, north of Delhi.

waiting to run away from there. I had to get a certificate from the college. Giving that reason I went to the college hostel and then, from a friend in Delhi, I borrowed money and came back here. I ran away.

Lakshmi: Without informing your brother?

Sharifa: Yes, without informing. He was very angry with me. My mother was then living at Manapparai and I stayed on there. So my brother, to teach me a lesson, cut off the money he was giving. But I was good at Hindi. The course I had done included short-hand. So I began taking classes for others living with mother. Everyday, I would read the newspaper, see if there were any jobs and apply. I was very keen to take up a job. (...)

Lakshmi: Sharifa, you understood how a girl was being treated in your family at this juncture. But when did you realise that almost all girls faced such problems?

Sharifa: I was taking classes in Manapparai. But I was always searching for a job. Generally, from my childhood, I was careful about being criticised. No one must comment on me. Mother was working then and running the Ss good food. But even then the fear was there. Because my brother would say ‘We have educated all of you.’ Because he had educated us. If we talked back he would go to the extent of reminding us that if we die he would have to bury us. ‘So don’t oppose us.’ My sister-in-law hailed from a rich family. She had 11 paternal uncles and all of them were doctors or engineers abroad. ‘She has 11 uncles. But whom do you all have? You have none but me.’ That is why, I did not want to go back and ask for help. So I began giving Hindi tuitions. I would use the money earned to apply for jobs. My mother was there and she was getting a pension. We managed on that. At that time, in 1988 an all India women’s conference was being held in Patna and there were 80 delegates from Tamilnadu. They needed a person who knew Hindi to accompany them. They were willing to pay Rs. 300 per day. I came to know of this through a friend. Rs. 300 per day was a very big amount for me in those days. So I went and made enquiries. They asked me to come. That was my first experience. I was in Manapparai. So from Manapparai, I came to Chennai and went to see a friend. Her name is Ritaamma. When I went there was one thing she said: “The star of hope for the future, please come.” I had gone there not having eaten the whole day. When I went in — when we go visiting our relatives, if they offered tea, we would not drink it right away. They would have to coax us at least fifty times and compel us. We would keep refusing and only then drink — since I was used to behaving so, when the lady asked whether I had eaten — she was from this field of activity — I said as a formality that I have eaten. She took me at my word and asked me to retire for the night. But I was starving. At night, she was preparing to leave next day morning. I offered to help. She accepted it. But I was surprised that she accepted my offer so casually. You see, I had not mixed with many people. So I got up at 7 o’clock the next day. They made upma and idli. We helped a bit. She asked me, ‘Will you have tea?’ I said, “No, I don’t drink tea.” She said okay and drank her tea.

Lakshmi: You expected her to insist.

Sharifa: Yes. We were used to that. So I said no to tea. The train was leaving at 8 o’clock. There were some 70, 80 women. I was scared and overwhelmed because they were all senior activists. I

was quite surprised at the way they spoke and sat watching them, as if they belonged to another world. They brought tiffin⁶⁰⁰ after 8 o'clock. I felt hungry when they opened the boxes to serve. But how can I say I am hungry? We were not brought up like that. With mother we could fuss. But elsewhere, we were not in the habit of saying, 'We are hungry, please give us food.' So when they brought breakfast at 8 they put two idlis on my plate. When she was about to put another one, somebody called her. I was so angry. I tried eating the idlis as slowly as possible. But she was not coming back. Then I drank two big mugs of water. I was so angry. I drank two mugs of water and sat in my place. Then she came back and asked, "Why do you eat so frugally?" So under such circumstances, we reached Patna⁶⁰¹. I knew about social work and only that. I knew nothing about feminism, and other issues of women. There were 1000 women gathered there. It was a mixture of educated people, women from rural areas, lawyers, professors; all of them were sitting together and talking about what happens inside homes. They were talking about women and violence and domestic violence and about sexual abuse. Our lives at home was different — a woman's role was defined. Once I attain puberty, I can't go out. If my brother beats me, I should accept it. When I was in Chandigarh⁶⁰² I used to go to bed praying that I should not have to get up to attend the call of nature. If I get up, my brother may mistake me. That was the atmosphere. He could not think any other way. As if we were always up to something. But from what they spoke here it seemed that the lives of all women were like that. The same thing was happening in my home. My sister became a widow two years after marriage. I have never seen her stepping out of the house. She would always sit by the window looking out. Another sister had married a person much older than her. But everyone was under control. My elder brother was younger than my elder sister, but it was he who controlled her. My mother was never like that. When that was the case, can we talk like this? Can we speak out? If I am beaten can I say it was painful? When I heard all this being spoken about, I was very surprised. Actually when I was doing the translation, I did not know how to go about it. Because observing all this was itself a big thing for me. All this I was also experiencing and so were my neighbours and my family. The feeling I can also talk openly like others came to me only there, at the all India women's conference. At that time the women's behaviour, their interactions; women sitting together, talking, discussing, eating, mingling, affected me. If I had not gone to that conference, I would not have become an activist. So that was my first entrance. (...)

Another thing about it was, after the Patna Conference⁶⁰³ was over — about 70 women from Tamilnadu had gone there. We had booked a separate bogey for us. While returning we came via Calcutta. We arrived in the morning in Calcutta and our train was due to depart in the evening. Our coach was going to be connected to Tamilnadu-Howrah train. What happened was we had forgotten to sign in the Station Master's book. We were waiting at 7 for our train. But our compartment was not to be seen. The train was to leave at 7.30 p.m. and we had all assembled at the station by 6.30 pm itself. But our compartment was not there. When we went and enquired, they replied very casually, "No, you travel by the next train." But the women said, "How can we travel in any other train leaving our compartment? Ours was Southern Railway. I think this was

⁶⁰⁰ Tiffin: In Southern India, light meals and finger-food. An Anglo-Indian word meaning 'snack'. This vegetarian fare usually includes some kind of a spicy side dish.

⁶⁰¹ Patna is the capital of Bihar state, in North East India.

⁶⁰² Chandigarh is a city in northern India, north of Delhi.

⁶⁰³ The 'All India Muslim Women's Conference' at Patna occurred in 1988 to discuss gender issues, sexual harassment of women, domestic violence, politics and women

the eastern. So how can we? ... It was actually Western railway. "We want our bogey." They refused but by that time, the train started. Immediately, all the women who were standing went and jumped in front of the train. Some 20 women. Some women managed to board the train and once it began to move, they got down. "Nothing doing. We won't let the train move without our bogey." I did not know what was happening. I began to worry. "Something is about to happen. They'll do something. How can people do all this?" By that time, the Station Master arrived with some other big officials. Then I was asked to translate whatever they were saying because they were speaking in Hindi. Immediately, I told them, "We have paid Rs. 7000 for a separate bogey for us. Also paid for water. So how can you do this?" They said, "This time there is a technical mistake. We suggest you travel by the unreserved compartment. We will make arrangements." But these women didn't agree. They retorted, "If we move out of this State, we will be entering another State, how is it possible? Nothing doing We want our compartment." They immediately spoke in a threatening manner. "We will arrest you." Some 20, 30 policemen came." The women said, "Okay, arrest us. Make arrangements for good food and water for 70 women." I was observing all this. It was cold then. Spontaneously, I too had jumped down thinking I must join them for they were doing the right thing. But I was still a bit afraid. I thought, if I have to join them, maybe I would have to do all this. Then when the officials realised that things were getting out of hand, the train was taken where the bogey was. Then they attached that bogey. To me it was something big we had achieved. I realised that if the cause was right, you can fight for it. So I returned from Patna with all these thoughts. After returning, my views, my thoughts and my tastes changed. I began to have expectations.

At that time, my mother was in Manapparai. When I began house-hunting casually, in Pudukkottai nobody was willing to give me a house on rent because at that time, I was very young, only 22 or 23 and people looked askance at a woman renting a place. Their attitude complicated everything for me. It was then I decided to bring my mother and sister to live with me. I am very attached to my mother. That was the main reason. I also had to prove that I am not alone and that my family was with me. Even then, there was an instance of paying an advance to a house owner and the whole thing getting cancelled and a big fight ensuing. They began to lay down rules since I came by myself. People just could not accept a girl coming riding on her cycle⁶⁰⁴ and asking to rent a house. A girl who can afford to pay Rs.⁶⁰⁵ 500 or Rs. 600 as rent, what sort of a girl would she be? I was also hesitant to approach people. Then once my mother came to live here, I continued with my library and Hindi tuitions. Then I went around the rural areas. Then there were many educated girls in the rural areas. I would mingle with them, give them Hindi tuitions and casually tell them about the workshop I had attended, about women, about education and so on. Not only the girls, but also their families mingled with me. So if the girls were told not to study, I would take the responsibility and get them admitted in a college. I would accompany them for interviews. So the girls also began to grow. I was evolving myself and I also helped the girls grow. This was my entry point.

Lakshmi: When did you learn to ride a cycle?

Sharifa: Actually, when I was 8, maybe 12 or 12 or 13, I had a dream about riding a cycle. I was so happy after the dream. Riding a cycle was something big. I couldn't believe riding in my

⁶⁰⁴ She is referring to a motorcycle here- not a bicycle.

⁶⁰⁵ Rupees- currency used in India.

dream. I was thrilled. I came to this field and learnt to ride from the girls. That first experience of riding a cycle surpassed even my first flight experience. Even today it is a big thing for me. Did I ride the cycle? I who felt happy dreaming about riding a bike, do I ride it really today? It feels like a big achievement.

Lakshmi: At what age did you really ride a cycle?

Sharifa: At the age of 23.

Lakshmi: And your dream was when you were 13?

Sharifa: Yes, when I was thirteen years old. (...)

Lakshmi: Sharifa, you told me you came to settle in Pudukottai⁶⁰⁶. But why did you choose Pudukottai?

Sharifa: Actually, when I was in Mannapparai, I made friends with a girl from Pudukottai. I was working as an office assistant in an organisation for six months. (...)I spoke to this friend about many things. She said, “You think so well. Why don’t you come and stay in Pudukottai?” So she took me to a friend. Just a chance happening. But before that I knew nothing about Pudukottai. Even now the memory of my first bus trip to Pudukottai is green in my memory.

Lakshmi: So it was an unknown place to you.

Sharifa: I was in no way connected to Pudukottai. But now I can’t even imagine leaving it.

Lakshmi: So after you came to Pudukottai, you had this library and then...?

Sharifa: When I began my classes and the library, there used to be lot of meetings. Small meetings. At that time we had gone to a nearby town for a programme. They had a poster exhibition. In other meetings, we had got a lot of information on subjects like women and media, women and violence, women and politics. About exploitation of women. When I saw the posters, I thought, why can’t we do something like this? We had no organisation as such then.

Lakshmi: Who had organised that Poster exhibition?

Sharifa: An organisation called ‘Sneha’⁶⁰⁷ from Nagapattinam⁶⁰⁸. We asked them if they would help us if we wanted to hold a similar exhibition. At that time there was no organisation called STEPS. There was some sort of an association — a group. A group of friends. There was a girl from the organisation I had worked with earlier and some six, seven of us organised a poster exhibition in Pudukottai in the Town Hall. College students came to see it. We called the local college principal to inaugurate the exhibition. In the visitors’ book there was a good response to

⁶⁰⁶ City in Tamilnadu, southern India.

⁶⁰⁷ Non-profit human rights organization.

⁶⁰⁸ Another city in Tamilnadu, southern India.

it. We spoke to all those who came to see the exhibition. About 30 or 40 people. There were doctors, college students. There were many of them. Then we sat under a tree and talked about doing something. We didn't think of an organisation. We wanted to function as an association and do something. We knew nothing about acronyms. We wanted to do some work but we didn't know much. We did not even register our Association. We put down the initials of all our names and it read as STEPS.

Lakshmi: Is that so?

Sharifa: It was not an abbreviation of any kind. Out of four or five words STEPS sounded appropriate. Empowerment, progress, steps. We took its meaning and saw whether it suited the work we did. And we decided to retain that name. In the first year, I took part in many meetings and seminars. One year went by. In the next year we planned a poster exhibition.. A woman, was the District Collector⁶⁰⁹ then. Sheela Rani Sungath was there. We immediately approached her and asked her if she would inaugurate our programme. She agreed and we invited her. When she saw the posters, she passed a circular saying that it should definitely be seen by school and college students.

So, the exhibition was extended for two more days. During those four days we never expected such a turn out. Town Hall is a very big hall. And there was a serpentine queue. We were delighted when so many came to see our exhibition.

Lakshmi: These were the same cloth posters?

Sharifa: Yes, cloth posters. At that time we did not have anything. Since 'Sneha' in Nagappatinam had it, we asked them to do it.

Lakshmi: So they would come and do it...

Sharifa: They would come and do it and we would organise it and do all the ground work necessary, so that the message could reach the public. In a way the poster exhibition introduced us to Pudukottai and became an entry point to stabilise ourselves. There was a literacy programme that was being conducted here. The Collector would include us in all the programmes sponsored by her. In the coastal areas here, there are a lot of Muslims. So the Collector asked us to go and talk to them about education. A collector asking me to do it gave me a lot of recognition and authority. If she goes and asks the Collector, things will get done, they felt. So once I took up the responsibility of visiting the coastal areas, I began meeting the Collector more often.

I could not quite grasp much about gender and sex analysis until then. There was a commitment to the job I was doing. That's all. I had not understood the other aspects. All that I had was the eagerness. The meetings were my exposure. There was no point talking to people at home. They thought I was doing a job. And the rule was when my brothers came home, I should not stay out late, I should be home early. But since I was my mother's pet, I took some liberties. But, my mother also didn't make us narrow minded. That was the biggest advantage. If I went overnight

⁶⁰⁹ Collector is a local government official.

to Madras and returned at 5 o'clock in the morning. I would ring up my home the previous day and ask them to please keep the door open because if I knocked on the door at 5 o'clock in the morning the neighbours will open their windows and look out.

Little things like this, affected me. Why do we talk about liberation? So many people talk so much. Why is it that I do not have the guts to go out on my own independently? (...)

So, first, space — let us talk of practical things. Let us cross this bridge and then, let's break new grounds. We need space for ourselves; we need a place of our own. This is the minimum requirement. If you see in our country, there are many working women's hostels. There are many destitute women's centres. But there is no space for women to sit, to talk, to think, to share. So I thought of this Centre. I consulted Madam. The Collector.

So we spoke to the Collector. She said it was a very good idea. But to accomplish all this you must have a registered society. You need an organisation. Only then can you do it. Until then I knew nothing about registering an organisation. I knew nothing more than that I wanted to work and do something. She said, "Okay, register your organisation. Then I will give space." Only then the organization got started.(...)

Lakshmi: Sharifa, when you registered STEPS organisation, did you want to work only in certain areas of Pudukottai? You described some general problems faced by women, isn't it? Did you want to tackle those problems? How did you plan to work?

Sharifa: When I registered in Pudukottai, I don't think I had planned any particular project or area. I wanted to work on women's problems, basic problems in the rural areas. We wanted to take up issues that affected them the most. But we did not decide on a particular area. Before we could decide on our work and the modality, people began approaching us with problems. For example, even when we were part of the literacy programme that the Collector had told us about, many petitions from villagers came to us. If there was a water problem somewhere, we would take that petition to the Collector and say "Madam, this village doesn't get water supply." Immediately, if she gives an order, government officials would arrive and handle the problem. When the Collectorate recommends it officials would act on it. This work was a kind of recognition for us. Immediately we plunged into our work.

On the other hand, problems like women and violence come to us. Soon after we registered our organisation we came to know that an eight year old girl was raped in a village nearby. We got the news and we went there and we examined the girl's private parts; there were 8 to 9 stitches. But her mother was just standing there weeping. Nothing else was known but that the boy was called and negotiations were on. They were saying, "Let this girl grow and reach puberty. We will get her married to this boy or penalise him, asking him to pay Rs. 1000 or Rs. 2000 as fine." So we spoke to the parents and said, "How can you let this boy get away so easily?" Then we made them file a case; file a FIR⁶¹⁰. Apart from such cases of violence there were others concerning land, water, etc. And as people began approaching us our work limits began to expand. (...)

⁶¹⁰ FIR: First Information Report; a document prepared by the police when they receive information about a crime.

Lakshmi: That is, as problems came to you, you began trying to solve them.

Sharifa: Yes, we were trying. This was on one side and on the other was the recognition one gets as a woman. One was basic needs. Or rights you may call them. But I wouldn't call them rights. It was their due naturally. So these are also rights. Also, even to normally sit, talk, speak or to rise and stand, one did not have a self, a self of one's own. To communicate these thoughts to others, I put in a lot of efforts. I should be myself — without knowing words like gender and sex, I had to struggle within myself. For the home I bought a mixie⁶¹¹. Immediately mother — mother had struggled a lot to bring us up — Immediately she packed the mixie and put it aside — “Suppose you get married one day?” is the logic.

Lakshmi: To take it along with you.

Sharifa: To give it to some unknown man. I had to tell my mother, “I go for work and I too feel hungry. You are packing away this mixie for a stranger. Think of my position. I bought this mixie so that it would be handy for me to leave early for work.” I compared this to another instance. When my brother returned from college, even before he reached home, my mother would dissolve sugar in water and keep it ready because as soon as he comes, she has to give him juice to drink. Wasn't I also working? I did not demand it. But the things I bring, why do you...? I had to tell such things over and over again for people at home to understand. The mixie was for ourselves; not for any unknown man. There is no need to spend my money for that. I began to do this kind of arguments also. (...)

Lakshmi: Sharifa, at this point of time, you were thinking of your personal life and your status in the society. And also about the position of women in the society. You have worked for some basic problems of women. So how did your family and the people of Pudukottai respond?

Sharifa: When I was doing this work, for someone like me who was cloistered at home, if I could work so much and help so much, it must've been a natural urge. I could think of nothing but this work. Despite criticism. Someone is seeking help... Because people didn't come to us at first. We went and sought them out. Even if one person brought a petition, my only thought was I have to do something. But within the family, the concern was how to leave me alone at home. Where my mother was concerned, she had educated her daughter to take up a job and manage her life. That's all. She couldn't think beyond that. But my mother is much stronger than me. But she was not aware of it.

When I came here, my brother said, “You do not want to get married because you want to roam with boys. That is why you reject marriage and have taken up a job.” But I began to protest and question — once I asked him, “If you say that I roam about and that I talk to any man, why do you then come to this house?” I couldn't bear it anymore and be silent. So I spoke. He couldn't accept my audacity. He slapped me. My mother said that I had spoken too much. Such a thing was not done in our family or in our entire ancestry — to oppose and question a man. But I had been seething for a long time, and so I asked him that — “Then why did you come to such a house? Why do you come here? No need for you to come” He could not take that. And he has

⁶¹¹ Mixie: Another word for a blender.

done his Ph.D. A highly educated man. A senior Professor. I have never shared with my friends the goings-on in our family. Had I shared, it would have meant that due to that I was doing this kind of work. I did not want that kind of linking. So once I began working, I had no time to brood on my problems at home. There was always something happening, problems to be solved following one after another.

Lakshmi: And was that because the public had accepted you?

Sharifa: Yes. The people had accepted me. Usually, if you see in other cities, this Rotary Club⁶¹² and Lions Club⁶¹³ only teach basket weaving and biscuit making. But here if we had a programme, the Lions Club President and the Rotary Club President will sit with us on the road. They will join us if we organise a march. If they had a function, they would invite us. (...)

Lakshmi: Sharifa, you said that you had to register your organization because you wanted a site for it. So how did this building come up?

Sharifa: As I said before, the Collector said it was a good idea when we told her about the women's centre. She showed us a place in town. That belonged to the government. So when we went to visit the place, all the officers joined hands and threw us out. So we went back to the Collector and told her about it. She consulted the G.M. and showed us this place. She said, "Don't leave it vacant, just construct a small building with at least a thatched roof. Otherwise things will be difficult for you." After we saw this plot — all those government officers and Union office people felt that we were not in any way connected to the government. They began asking, why do these people need this plot? This plot has high value. They only saw the value of the ground but not the value of women. They did not want people not connected in any way to be allotted this plot and there were some problems. We had been asked to put up something. But how could we? We had nothing. Only commitment and that drive in us that we have to do something. So again we sat and consulted one another. We thought we will approach people known to us, and get bricks, some cement, some sand and do what we can. So we got something. We decided to do the labour ourselves. We employed only one man — the mason. But soon as we started work with his help, they wanted to stop us. They would come and ease themselves all over the place. We would clean up the whole place the next morning and start work all over again. Otherwise they would spread Nirodh⁶¹⁴ condom packets all over. As though we were building a prostitution centre. They could not go against the Collector. So they thought that we would run away if they did all this. Until then we had never seen a condom. (...)

In a school here they had invited me to talk on women's education. So I had gone there. All the students stood up and a girl stood up. She must be from the 7th or 8th Standard. She said, "You have come to our school to talk about education for girls. It is indeed a very good thing. This school has a good library and even a good auditorium. But we are grown up girls. Every month we get our periods. But there is no toilet for us nor water. Do you know how many times we

⁶¹² Rotary Club: An international club (made up for businesses leaders and professionals) with locations throughout the world, dedicated to humanitarian services.

⁶¹³ Lions Club: Also an international network of clubs (started in Chicago). A voluntary organization dedicated to improving community conditions.

⁶¹⁴ Noridh: Brand of condoms.

have been humiliated in the class? Can't you do something about it? Then how can we study?" I felt as though somebody had slapped me. Because this problem was not confined to just one government school in Pudukottai. In every government school, in every government office, this problem was there. So a project to build a latrine in that village was sent. Not that we did it. We had been insisting on it for 15 years. We don't have to study in Oxford University for this. This was a common reality. But that even something as common place as this had to be pointed out, pained me. So beginning with the latrine, women needed space, to sit, to talk... If one missed the night bus one could go to STEPS, relax, sleep... So keeping all this in mind we began the building work. Actually we started in '92 but it was completed only in '96.

Lakshmi: After 4 years!

Sharifa: Yes, 4 years. We could not manage. At that time this office was not there. There was no kitchen. Only the hall below. To build that hall downstairs, we struggled so much. You can say that along with our struggles, we grew. (...)

Anyhow, in spite of all problems this Women's Centre came up because women needed a space of our own. Women who come here to do their marketing, to seek admission in school and college or to visit the hospital. To give petitions. Any ordinary woman will come and relax here for a couple of minutes.

Lakshmi: To relax.

Sharifa: To sit, relax, talk — for all this we built this Centre. It is now a place for everyone. Women come and stay here also. (...)

Lakshmi: Sharifa, there have been caste riots and communal riots in many places in Tamilnadu. And you have gone to visit such places. And STEPS has done a lot to restore communal harmony. Can you tell us about your experiences?

Sharifa: Generally, after I came to this field, instances of communal riots in Tamilnadu have been very few. Even then, in 1994, that was my first experience in Pudukottai. There is a place called Kasim Pudupettai, on the border between Pudukottai and Tanjavur. There was a big fight between two communities. The parties involved were all rich. It started as business competition and turned into a communal riot. The M.L.A.⁶¹⁵ of that area, was singling out shops and houses belonging to Muslims and burning them down. There were heavy losses. We were working among students then and one of the students from there told us about this happening. Apart from me, in Madurai there was SOCOT, a lawyers' collective. I took them along with me there. The houses there were made with material brought from abroad. Petrol had been poured over them and huge bombs were exploded to raze them to the ground. There were heavy losses like that. In addition to that, there were 7, 8 pregnant women who were beaten when they were running away. They had suffered miscarriages. We organised a peace meeting, to reach the message to the Collector. A petition had already gone to him. All this was already being done but we made a special effort and organised a peace meeting with these people in the Town Hall. At that peace

⁶¹⁵ MLA: Member of Legislative Assembly is a representative elected by the voters of an electoral district to the Legislature of a State in the Indian system of government.

meeting, there were many M.L.As, Jamaat⁶¹⁶ leaders, some big shots and traders. We were the only two women.. They spoke about lakhs⁶¹⁷ lost. Tyre factory was lost and so on. So each one spoke and when it was my turn, I said, “Yes, his loss was Rs. 10 lakhs and this one’s was about 7 lakhs and someone a house. In the same way, those girls who ran lost their honour. They suffered abortions⁶¹⁸. This was an enormous act of violence against women. So just as you compensate for other losses, action must also be taken on people who perpetrated this. But this rebounded on us. They got hold of a few people who had accompanied us and asked how what they had spoken about their women could be revealed.

‘A Muslim girl who has not even covered her head is talking about this.’ Those who had taken me took me aside and said, “Madam, in this place, you talk about education, talk about health, but not about these matters.” I was flabbergasted.

Then they immediately rang up my house and told them that their daughter was acting against religion. Only then I realised the position I was in. On the one hand I was from the minority, and on the other, there was this issue. Another communal riot in Nagoor followed this. I had gone there with the PUCL⁶¹⁹ Fact Finding Team. In many places there things were still burning. No one had gone there. As if the intention was to destroy all the Muslims. An old woman was almost dying. In another part, there was a twenty year old woman. You must be knowing about observing Idda. When a woman is widowed or divorced she must observe Idda for 40 days. She was observing Idda. About twenty years old she was. She was sitting with two children. She was pregnant with another. When I enquired, she said, “I don’t know what happened. My husband went to buy a coconut but he came back as a dead body. I don’t know what happened.” When so unaware of happenings these women were, tomorrow if one of them becomes a sex-worker or walks on the road, as a destitute, who would be responsible was the question. These women were totally unaware. So we met the S.P. and did rehabilitation work. But I was not satisfied.

So on our own, we held communal harmony meetings with the help of some organisations. Because if I had it done it on my own, they would have seen me as a Muslim. From both sides, we were being attacked. The general opinion among Hindus was that I was supporting the Muslims. The Muslims commented, “This woman does not cover her head nor does she follow Islamic rules. So who is she to work for Muslims? She is doing some mischief from within.” So I was under fire from both sides even then. Despite that what we did was to join the Trichi group Thamizhaga Pengal Ezuchi Amaippu (Women’s Awareness Group) who had organised a journey from Kanyakumari to Chennai. We joined them and held 25 public meetings. (...)

Lakshmi: Sharifa, on behalf of women of the Dalit community and the Minority Community STEPS has raised questions and taken action. Can you tell us about it?

Sharifa: Our overall work is to work for women. A woman must get social recognition. Whether the problems arise from being Dalits, or of a particular religion, or social or family problems we look at them from the women’s angle. We have done a lot of work for the Dalits. We have

⁶¹⁶ The Islamic and political party working in Pakistan since 1940.

⁶¹⁷ Lakhs: 100,000 Rupees.

⁶¹⁸ She means “miscarriages” here, not elected abortions.

⁶¹⁹ PUCL: People's Union for Civil Liberties is India's oldest and largest human rights organization.

provided basic amenities for more than 100 villages as a part of Community Development. But we have not seen them as specifically Dalits when we deal with people's problems. I can say two things about matters concerning Dalits. If you look at it from the angle of women and violence, I will relate one incident. There was a Dalit person here, who was already married. He kidnapped a 15-16 year old girl and took her away. He took the girl away in the name of love. But immediately the very next day some two three people looked for them and brought them back and also the two friends who had helped them. Then they held a Panchayat meeting. There were Dalits there, some leaders, and also members of other community, the Kallar community. The Panchayat leader finally ordered them to be tonsured⁶²⁰. The man who kidnapped the girl, and his mother — all three had their head shaven clean and it became a problem. They came here to the office with their tonsured heads. They explained what had happened. They did not explain that he was a married man. We saw this injustice and we sent them to the police station to file a case under the PCR Act⁶²¹. Next day his wife turned up. "Madam, he is my husband. And I was the one who complained. My husband married a second time. So that is why they did this." "So you take whatever action you want." I said, "Even if he had done this it was wrong to tonsure him. He was also wrong in marrying a second time. Give me a petition. Let me see." We accepted her petition. Until then the news of this second marriage had not spread among the Dalits. And the 'Pudhiya Tamizhagam Party hadn't set foot here. Soon as they came to know, those people came here. "His second marriage is a family problem. Only the tonsuring is a social issue. You should not take up this issue. Withdraw it," they told me. I said, "How I can I not take it up?" Members of the Association for Inter-caste Marriage came. "Since this is an inter-caste matter, you should not take it up." I retorted, "You take up problems of inter-caste marriages and also Dalit problems. And also say that I should not. But isn't this second marriage wrong? So I will question that too." Then the Dalit leaders and others came to my office to threaten us. "You do not know me. I have been to jail under TADA⁶²², under POTA⁶²³. You do not know about us." They printed posters that we are anti-Dalit. They said I know nothing about Dalits. I told them, "I have worked a lot more with Dalits than all of you ever have. I have dealt with many cases you have never heard of. Since you have come to my organisation, speak only about women. If you want to talk about your caste, religion and your people go outside and talk." It became a complicated political issue to deal with. 'Pudhiya Thamizhagam' was able to establish

⁶²⁰ To have one's head shaved (is not necessarily a mark of shame).

⁶²¹ PCR Act: Protection of Civil Rights Act. Protected Individuals from being categorized as "untouchable."

⁶²²The Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Act 1987 (TADA) established special courts or "designated courts" to try those arrested for terrorist acts and disruptive activities. It conferred broad discretion upon the authorities to arrest persons and to try them. One of the most important points about TADA was the effect it had on the population of Punjab; it erased the distinction between violent and peaceful protests. Under TADA a person could be detained, without charge or trial for suspicion of belonging to, supporting or having knowledge of militant groups. The police were given strong search and seizure powers under the Act, they could indict any person on the basis of suspicion. Once indicted under TADA, the accused would be tried by a special court under extraordinary procedures. In such trials, protections normally available to an accused in a liberal society would be ignored. Once under trial the accused could be convicted on the basis of minimal evidence that would have been insufficient for conviction by an ordinary court under normal Indian law.

⁶²³POTA: The Prevention of Terrorism Act. POTA was enacted soon after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States and the adoption of a United Nations Security Council resolution against terrorism. The legislation allowed security agencies to hold suspects for up to 180 days without filing charges. In practice, the law was often used against marginalized communities such as Dalits (so-called "untouchables"), indigenous groups, Muslims, and the political opposition (from: <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2004/09/22/india9370.htm>). This act has been repealed.

itself in Pudukkotai on the basis of this case. Krishnaswamy announced that he will walk from here to Viralimalai. There was all such internal politics taking place.

But if you see it as a community-based problem, you have to accept that atrocities are committed on Dalits. We have not ignored the fact that basic rights are denied to them. There is a village called Aranthangi. It is not exactly a village, it comes under the revenue department. There are 100 Dalit families there. Government had given title deeds of three cents of land each and built houses for them. Not built a house but given them a plot. They had put up thatched roofs. The floor is made of mud. They have to spread cow dung over it and this is the way they live. It was a low-lying area. When it rains, water gets collected. The land there had been bought by other caste people who had bribed the government and built houses. So during monsoon, rainwater will enter the huts. So during monsoon, the women will not go to work for they can't leave children and aged people behind. So they would have to go without food that day. At least 2 or 3 people will die every monsoon, every year. This had been going on for 10 years. These Dalit women have been making trips to the government offices and the Taluka offices. But nobody cared for them there.

This problem was brought to our notice in '97. So we went there to find out. We spoke to them. So we decided to bring the problem to public notice and went on a hunger strike. Then the Minister's car arrived. But the police surrounded us to hide us from view. But these women went and stood right in the middle. Immediately the Minister goes down. The Collector said, "Within a month, I will set everything right. So please don't make it an issue." We agreed and let it go. Two years went by. For two years there was no rain. Third year, it began pouring. So I took a final decision. Whatever struggle it is what we do is to keep the affected people in the forefront; we would be there only as consultants. But we would present the issues. We told the people." This is our last attempt. Anyhow, during monsoon 2 or 3 of us are going to die. So let us all go en masse to the Collector's office and sit there and die." What I did was, I told them, "It is going to rain here. And we don't have a house. So let us go and live in the Collectorate." The people agreed. Then we set a date and planned that on that date, we will take all our belongings, food, goats and cows and load everything in a lorry and go and sit there. Come what may.

So when we organised that, others in the women's movement were also with us. STEPS does not have a specific village. We join hands with others. What's being done is important.

Then we sat with the Adi Dravida officer and prepared a statement and within a month, the government gave alternate land to them and made sure that the allotted amount was not routed elsewhere. An issue that had dragged on for 10 years got solved in 3 years. We were ecstatic when the case got over. Looking back we wonder how we overcome all that. Of all the struggles we took up, this was the biggest. (...)

Lakshmi: It was different in Mettuppatti. There you got them land title deeds.

Sharifa: The problem with Mettuppatti was — usually in a domestic quarrel, the husband will order the wife to leave have the house. To put an end to that, we got title deeds allotted to women. So far we have got 3000 title deeds bearing names of women. In Pudukottai.

Lakshmi: Land registration papers?

Sharifa: Land registration papers. Once upon a time that place was occupied by refugees. But they had left. It is a 30-year old history. People from different backgrounds had settled there for the past 20 to 25 years.

Lakshmi: Not any particular community?

Sharifa: No, it included people from all communities.

Lakshmi: All communities...

Sharifa: Dalits are also there. Most of the families were Dalits. Most of them were labourers. In 90% of the families both man and woman have to work to fill their stomach. They had been there for 20 years and not one had a ration card and that place had no land deeds. No election card either. There was a girl working in our office here. She had been victimised once. We posted her there. We made her get all the details about that area and after a struggle of 2 or 3 years, we got them land title deeds, ration card and election card. We built a 'Balwadi'⁶²⁴ for them. We got roads and pipes laid and now that is a model village. (...)

Lakshmi: Sharifa, STEPS has tackled many issues on women and violence. Can you tell us about some cases?

Sharifa: Now there are two kinds of violence against women. One is psychological. Another is physical. When these women bring the cases to us, even they are not aware of how bad the psychological torture has been.

What we do generally is, when we get a petition, we'll talk to the concerned person and see how it goes. We'll talk to the man also. If that goes okay we will warn them or keep a close watch on them. Otherwise, if there is no rapprochement, we will tell the boy to fulfil all her needs. Whatever she needs, depending on his financial condition. The third option is to file a case in the police station. (...)

Lakshmi: Apart from problems arising out of domestic strife, the problems women encounter in public have also been taken up by STEPS, isn't it? You once told me about the women who sold cucumber. Can you talk about that.

Sharifa: All the cases are related to women. Whatever issue we take up. But how they face the problems and how successful we are in getting a fair deal is important. We intervene in whichever way we can. Now this cucumber problem, there are two bus stands in Pudukottai. One is old and the other is new. This bus stand has been here for the past 25 years. Women from the villages around Pudukottai, specially, widows, or who have been oppressed and thrown out by their husbands or old mothers not cared for by their children, they would buy cucumber in bulk and sell it at the bus stand. They earn about Rs. 50 to Rs. 60 daily. And they live on that. I have seen this ever since I came to Pudukottai. It was the normal routine thing. We would pay Rs. 2

⁶²⁴ Balwadi: preschool.

and eat it. They will not enter the bus. They would stand around with cucumbers on a plate and sell. These merchants who were selling 'coca-cola' and other drinks...

Lakshmi: Pepsi?

Sharifa: Yes, they found that their business was suffering due to these women. So one day they threatened these women and drove them out, asking them to sell outside the bus stand. They were told they had no right to come inside.

I was out of town for 15 days and when I came, I saw an old woman — I think this was the year before last, it happened in 2002. We had a very hot summer that year. An old lady was sitting looking weary. I asked her, "What happened? Why are you like this?" She said, "These rogues, they have thrown us out. We are not supposed to sell here, they say." I didn't wait to ask her any more questions. I was furious. How can they be so inhuman? How much would they be selling in a day? At the most for Rs. 40 or Rs. 50. How unjust to say that this small amount was going to affect their business! So I came rushing to office. I took out 50 visiting cards. I distributed them and asked them to go inside and see what happens. Everyone in the office was asking what was the matter. But I said nothing. I was so angry. In five minutes, the leaders, the treasurer and all the shop keeps gathered outside by 10:30a.m. I asked, "Who are you threaten the old woman?" They said, "No, madam. Please do not interfere in all this." They knew I travel by bus many times. "Why shouldn't I interfere? Do you have monopoly over buses?" I said. They said, "No, madam, you do not know these women are small traders. Thefts take place because of them. And they encourage prostitution. And we cannot accept that." I retorted, "I will give two days' time. They must sell. Otherwise you have to deal with what will happen." I don't know how I dared to say that. But I could not tolerate the injustice. But they tried to warn me. "Madam, you are respected here. See to it that it remains so." I told them I was not bothered if my name fell into disrepute.

All those women came to me. The office was filled with cucumber! The women came with baskets of them! I took all of them in a procession. I did not make any announcement I took them straight to the Collector. I spoke to the Collector. By then the police knew. They did not allow anyone inside. They allowed only 4 or 5 to accompany me. Then the Collector said, "We have not done any such thing. He phoned the Commissioner. All the women got an identity card and it got done.

Without support no one can survive. People can speak and act in whichever way regarding women. Society has given this power and sanction to men. Until the day women are given the same rights, whenever that is, until then, we have to work towards it and so we began working harder.

Lakshmi: You told me that you have some self-help programmes for women? Can you explain them?

Sharifa: With self-help as an aim many women have been brought together. Using self-help as a tool for this is indeed a good thing. But what happens is, women already work at home and there is no recognition for their work.

Lakshmi: No money either.

Sharifa: Yes, no money. And no power.

As soon as they get loan from self-help groups this again goes to pay for husband's drinking or for the daughter's marriage. So the question is how self-reliant the woman is. How much say she has in taking decisions regarding the loan remained a question. If you see, after 50 years of age most women eat even one square meal without any respect in their sons' homes. We see this happening. Then what have these self-help groups done? They boast of having done this and that but what have they done for their existence? (...)

So we said, "Okay, you take a loan or do whatever you want when you are capable. But save at least a minimum of Rs. 100 per month in your name. Do whatever you want with the rest. Put this money in fixed deposit for 5 or 10 years. So when they are 40 or 50, they will get Rs, 70000 to Rs. 80000 in hand. So we did this kind of work. For some others. We said, those who ask for a loan, should have something — land or house in her name. Otherwise the least is to buy goats or cows and use their produce — goats or cows or poultry. If we buy you 4 goats, once the goat has a calf, you can give two goats to us. It is cows they want, then it will be 4 cows. We kept the affected women here. We feed them. They get 3 square meals and live with us. We give them Rs. 100 per month to deposit in the bank. We will get them goat or cows. We will set aside some goats or cows for them, every year. So once they become capable, they take care of them.

Lakshmi: They will make a living with these goats and cows?

Sharifa: They have to. Therefore when we give self-help in an income- generation programme, the right to determine the way she wants to live, to be independent, must be given to the woman. But saying self-help groups and the women's earnings being ploughed back into the family, is no way....

Lakshmi: Since I come from an urban area, I am asking you this. How much will a woman earn with goats, cows or a hens?

Sharifa: For goats and cows, there should be a lush hillside or fertile land, that is enough. To have livestock and take care of them is not difficult. If you have 2 hens, in 6 months you will have 25 to 30 hens.

Lakshmi: Is that so?

Sharifa: Yes, if you hatch the eggs — now homestead hens cost more than Broiler hens. A kilo will be about Rs. 80 to 90. It is difficult to get eggs of homestead hens. The price today for one egg of homestead hens is Rs. 3. One egg of a broiler hen is Rs. 1.50.

Apart from working in the field and doing the household chores, by maintaining livestock, a woman takes care of her entire family. The man is supposed to be the head of the household, but in shouldering all the responsibilities, be it the house or familial responsibilities outside like attending to the auspicious and other formalities, the women play a major part.

Lakshmi: Sharifa, tell me about your work to reach out to women to inform them about social analysis? That work is among educated women isn't it? Do you conduct workshops for illiterate women also?

Sharifa: Through the women's movement and organisations or through self-help groups, we have been helped to make women come together as a group. In this we have been successful. But whenever there is a march, a struggle or any problems, the women rarely understand why they participate and what their responsibility is or why such a thing happened to a particular girl. They come because they are called or if they are with an organisation or if they feel that an injustice done to a woman must be questioned. To teach them why they should struggle, support and express their will, why they should support another woman, to know all this, to know about this society, it is necessary to know about social analysis.

Lakshmi: They should know.

Sharifa: Yes. So we not only aim at those who work in NGOs but also journalists, college teachers, village leaders and conduct trainings for them. So these trainings are not just in the form of sitting and discussing. It'll be an emotional training. To make them fully understand, we show videos, stage plays, have discussions. We ask the affected women to talk. With all this, they are able to take in a lot. Then, in village — there are two kinds of classes. One which we conduct and the other where we go where it is being conducted. And the third thing is, just as men go every year in January to Sabari Malai⁶²⁵, likewise, we celebrate Women's Day every March. As far as I know, in the beginning, the only group that celebrated Women's Day in Pudukottai must be ours. Today we don't celebrate it here, because everyone does. From the Post Office, they would come:, "Madam, you must come for Women's Day celebration this year."

Lakshmi: To give a speech, is it?

Sharifa: From government offices, from the Revenue Department, they would come saying, "Madam, today we are observing Women's Day. Let's talk about it." We would be so happy that at least they are doing something... (...)

Lakshmi: Sharifa, you have decided to build a mosque for Muslim women and it's a hot topic at the international level. Everyone is talking about you and even the B.B.C. has mentioned it. When did such a thought come to your mind? So far, you have been taking up and fighting for women in general. But for the past 2, 3 years you have been paying more attention to problems of Muslim women, isn't it? Is this idea of building a mosque for Muslim women an outcome of that?

Sharifa: I have been in this field for the past 15 years. There have been many changes since then. Women have begun to come out and speak boldly. Now even for the lesbian movement women are asking for special rights. I do not dispute that. But where there has been such progress, if there is one sector that has been grossly neglected, it is that of Muslim women.

⁶²⁵ Sabari Malai: A place of pilgrimage, a remote shrine in southern India that draws three to four million pilgrims each year in south Indian state of Kerala.

Lakshmi: Do you think so?

Sharifa: Yes. So far, after coming to this field. I have never identified myself as a Muslim woman because I never got the space to do that. Another thing is, I am not still prepared to come out and act as openly as I speak. I was not sure whether I would last in this field. But I realised about the neglect of this sector in '95, when I did a research on the status of Muslim women and the social and economic reasons. I did research in five districts.

Lakshmi: Where was this research? In Tamilnadu?

Sharifa: No, it was sponsored by an international women's research active group. It was done by RAAG Women's Research Action Group of Bombay. It came as a chance offer to do it in Tamilnadu. Until then, I was going around in a carefree manner. In those 5 districts I had to find out about education, economical status, and their community with emphasis on their health. If you see the results, even I couldn't believe it. Could their condition be so deplorable? If you see the outcomes, one out of 5 Muslim women will have psychological problems, 1 out of 5 would be a divorcee. One out of 5 would be deserted by her husband. In one family out of every 5, there would be a widow or a girl married at a young age. One woman or the other in this kind of situation will be visible. Then I was taken aback at the research results. Another thing is, in Islam, dowry is taboo. One shouldn't lend money on interest. One shouldn't drink alcohol. There are so many rules. But what was happening had no connection with all this. They should pay 'Meher'⁶²⁶ to the girl. They were giving Rs. 500 'Meher' and demanding Rs. 50,000 as dowry. So this too is against Islam. So why was this happening? I found that 1500 years ago, when Islam was established, the Prophet got married to a woman 35 year older than him. Certainly it would not have been for bodily attraction. It was meant to give some support. Widow remarriage is rare in other communities even now. But He did it 1500 years ago. So when Islam had such radical views on women 1500 years ago, now why do they say women have to remain indoors, observe purdah and not go outside; that they know nothing and that we should not talk about them? That even the Human Rights groups did not come forward to take up the cause of Muslim women was something I couldn't understand. So somebody had to do something in this sector and I decided it will be myself. I did not release my research work in '95 for in '92 there were riots in Bombay and the Babri Masjid⁶²⁷ demolition. So I thought my research work might prove counter productive and the Hindus might look askance at it. I never looked for a role model. Is there anyone who works like me? Can we work together? Any Muslim girl. I had come to that state of search because no one was touching the matter. So Muslim women have to deal with Muslim women's problems. It was a question of how much I had grasped regarding this.

Sharifa: After that survey I felt I had to do something. Then I conducted a state level Seminar. Many people participated in it.

⁶²⁶ Meher: Dowry paid by a man to the bride /family for marriage.

⁶²⁷ Babri Masjid: A famous Muslim mosque. On December 6 1992, over a million Hindutva activists brought in by the Hindu nationalist Vishwa Hindu Parishad and BJP, razed the 16th century Muslim mosque, sparking nationwide riots between Hindus and Muslims that killed more than 2,000 people.

Lakshmi: In Pudukottai?

Sharifa: Not in Pudukottai, in Trichi.... Some famous Muslim poets, who write about Dalits, how they treat their women is a question. I was part of an incident when I was doing my research I had to interview many intellectuals. I went to the family of a well-known writer. His daughter had died a few days ago. He was aware that she had been murdered. He brought out a circular and gave it to all those who attended the funeral. He was thanking everybody who came for the funeral. "I am grateful to all those who have come to console us on my daughter's death. Let Allah forgive those who have done this to my daughter." I wondered what kind of radical poet he was. Nobody was willing to talk about this then. Now if you go see how they fare in education, it's very poor. In many places, the main entrance is for men and the back entrance is for women. And the same is true for houses too.

Lakshmi: Are you talking about houses?

Sharifa: In houses as well as in schools. Wherever Muslims are located, there will be this practice. In some towns, there are health problems because women are not allowed to go out in the daytime even for water. I will give you an instance. During menstruation, women would wash the cloth used and tuck it in a niche on the thatched roof. A woman used it not noticing a scorpion on it. She was stung. Since she was stung in her private parts she did not tell anyone. On the spot she died. There have been two such instances.

Lakshmi: Did they die?

Sharifa: They died. Even a casual study reveals such horrifying facts. A more in depth survey may reveal a condition that can make one shudder. Why has not anyone bothered to think of this sector? So why shouldn't I work among them? This thought occurred to me. After the seminar, we made some recommendations. Mainly, if others work on Islamic issues they would question you — "What do you know about this religion?" Whether I like it or not, my identity is that of a Muslim. So my questions have to be answered. In Islam, dowry is not allowed. You cannot lend money on interest. Why don't you exclude those who take dowry or lend money on high interest from the Jamaat? This was our first recommendation. If you ostracise, then there would be nobody in the Jamaat, because all are guilty. Then this Talaq⁶²⁸ issue has to be reconsidered.

Lakshmi: These recommendations were general in nature?

Sharifa: No, we passed 10 to 12 of them in our seminar.

Lakshmi: Resolutions.

Sharifa: Yes, resolutions, we passed them in our seminar. We did not decide to place it before the government. We decided to keep them and announce them through a large women's forum. But soon after the seminar some 4 or 5 Maulvis⁶²⁹ came in a car looking for us. "How can you discuss and pass such recommendations about the Jamaat?"

⁶²⁸ Talaq: Islamic divorce practice.

⁶²⁹ Maulvis: clerics.

“Who do you think you are?” I said, “I think nothing of myself. But Sir, I am as much concerned about Islam as you are. You comment that if women behave in a particular way, it is anti-Islam. Similarly, I also have the right to talk about Muslim men.

Then I held a conference after that. We asked the girls to speak at the conference. In these 15 years, I have made many girls talk. But there was a great difference between what those women spoke and what these women expressed. These women only needed the space to speak. When they opened up, it was unbelievable.

Lakshmi: They spoke their hearts out?

Sharifa: Yes, from their hearts. They spoke about sexual rights.

Sharifa: The women were asking if they didn't have desires. At that time Shabana Azmi⁶³⁰ shaved off her head for the film 'Water'. Shabana Azmi shaved off her head and that caused a lot of commotion. And here, because she was beautiful her husband had tonsured her. If you look into each incident the lives of these women are so different. These women get talaq, notices through email, by post and over the phone. Divorce notices. After divorce, the idda... In a particular case, a woman's father came running for help. He had given a petition for harassment of his daughter. She had to go to the police station the next day. But his son-in-law had sent a divorce notice. So the father comes running with that to us. If I open this, my daughter has to observe Idda. Should she go to the police station or not?" See how tricky these issues are. You give women minimum rights which are there in Islam or at least look at it from a humanitarian angle," we pleaded with them.

Lakshmi: Even after talaq you have to observe Idda, is it?

Sharifa: Yes, both in the case of talaq and death of a husband, a woman must observe Idda. Generally for her mind, her body and everything else is under the control of others. She has no power. Women'll be begging outside the dargah⁶³¹. They'd only worry if they are begging with or without purdah. Nobody is bothered about their begging itself. If you see the way they live, there are basic problems. There are so many issues. So there was a need to discuss about this sector. So while discussing in all the districts about this the problems began increasing day by day. So why can't women be in the Jamaat. Jamaat is a body that takes decisions on all that is happening in our society, be it good or bad. They will sit in the mosque and discuss. So if there is some issue involving a woman they will sit and talk about it in the mosque. Now the husband will come and give his side of the matter. But the woman cannot go there because women are not allowed inside mosques. So on one's behalf, on behalf of the woman, her father or her brother will represent her. They can only ask if the woman was fed and clothed properly. They will not

⁶³⁰ Shabana Azmi is a famous Indian actress. "Water" is part of a trilogy of films (Fire and Earth being the other two) by director Deepa Mehta.

⁶³¹ In the Indian subcontinent, dargahs are often the site of festivals held in honor of the deceased saint at the date of his Urs, which is a day dedicated to the saint which is usually but not exclusively the saint's death anniversary. The shrine is illuminated with candles or strings of electric lights. There may be parades and processions, performances of religious music, and fairs with food stalls and fun rides.

be able to talk about her feelings and her life. That is not the place to talk about all that. A judgement is passed without her consent. This is not acceptable to evolving Muslim women like us. So we said, "When you discuss things in the Jamaat, let there be two women representatives at least. Even if you say that we should wear ten purdahs to be there, we will agree. We'll wear purdah and come there. But when you are talking about us, we will be present." This was one of our recommendations. Likewise, during marriages, there should be one woman witness. If there are two male witnesses, then there should be at least one female witness. Normally what happens is, near Nagoor and Madurai there is a dargah. People will go to the dargah and get married a second time. We questioned that. We also insisted that medical test should be conducted for both men and the women, specially for the man before the marriage. We made such recommendations. When we discussed these issues and made women speak it out, it dawned on us that there was no special place where women could sit and discuss these issues. But then isn't a mosque like a community centre? It is not just a place where prayers are held. Everything is discussed there isn't it? So then, by the same rule, we should be able to talk about our problems. We are half the population. But we aren't counted. I began to speak about this amongst women. It had a great impact. Is our relationship with a mosque only as Janasa? Janasa means a dead body. 'So only the Janasa, the dead body goes in. I don't go in' I created this feeling in the minds of those women. In the conference, there were about 600-1000 women, and I could sense their anger and passion. The conference began with tears and moved to anger and disgust. So, we don't have to be quiet anymore. So what we did was from each district we chose two women. There are women representatives from 10 districts.

Lakshmi: 20 women?

Sharifa: No, not 20 women, more than that. In 10 districts, there are almost 10 to 15 groups. We organised a Muslim Women's Group. We select two women from each district for the group "Come and sit and talk. What is the Jamaat? It is where four people come and meet."

Lakshmi: That means you don't look upon the mosque just as a place of worship?

Sharifa: No, it is not place of worship alone. Now, you see a 60 year old man will sleep in a mosque or in a temple. Where will a woman go to stretch go to herself, just to relax? To talk about oneself, to do things such a place is necessary. So the mosque will have space for worship, it will also be a place where the good and bad in women's life can be discussed and decisions taken. To discuss income generation, their problems — the problems of women whose lives are affected — and education of their girls. It should be overall a community center. Definitely to pray. They will also pray along with the Jamaat. So I suggested that there is a need for space for women to pray and that a mosque is needed. I suggested it and the women proposed it.

Lakshmi: All the women?

Sharifa: All the women proposed it and there is no other alternative. Now I have to build it.

Lakshmi: What was the reaction to that?

Sharifa: Both opposition and support. When we discuss this, at times some good-natured men too would join. So one Muthalippu said, "I will give you land to build a mosque" Then he went and spoke at his village. I do not know what he spoke but he must have said, "They are going to do things for women. It will be all to the good of women of our town." Then their Jamaat invited us, they said, "We have space in the mosque area here. And we can give you a 10 cents more. You can build your mosque here. We will give you space." We replied, "This is no ordinary matter. You will receive world-wide praise but there will also be...."

Lakshmi: Opposition too...

Sharifa: Who would oppose us, they said. They tore a page from a notebook. Took signatures immediately and gave it to us. But I knew this was not going to succeed. We spoke about everything to a reporter. What they did was to publish a report entitled, "We want to relax." Within three days, that Parambur village became a historical place. All the Islamic magazines and big shots asked them, "On what basis did you give this place to these women?" You see, from Pudukottai, even if an Imam goes there, it is big news in that place. When from Delhi and Madras people came they felt they had done a sinful act and they totally...

Lakshmi: They withdrew the offer.

Sharifa: They withdrew. Then we began thinking. Initially we were thinking of building only a mosque. But suppose there are 50 women with us. They may want to come to STEPS to discuss about women. If get thrown out of their homes for that, it is our responsibility and duty to take care of them. That is, what we do must take them into account. So we are waiting to buy the land ourselves and build a structure on it.

From each district we have representatives and we are forming a Women's Jamaat of all our representatives. A State level Jamaat called 'Tamilnadu Women's Jamaat' Committee. This Women's Jamaat committee will meet once a month. In whichever police station. Jamaat or wherever a woman's petition is rejected and justice denied to her, the Jamaat will meet at that place and discuss.

Lakshmi: Will you have a woman priest in your mosque?

Sharifa: Definitely. People comment about me — what does she know about Islam? After all I've studied in a Muslim University. Even then they comment. Okay let it be that I do not know. But give me what I know. If I ask so much without knowing much about Islam, just imagine how much I would demand if I knew it well? I would ask for my rights, isn't it? So my part is to have proper people for everything. STEPS is taking it ahead. And then when the full structure is completed, I will hand it over to those women and withdraw myself. I am preparing myself to be strengthened until that part of it is over.(...)

I've become accustomed to all sorts of oppositions. I have become an experienced hand at dealing with it. At the most, they will try to smear my character. I am now used to that. Second is my life. Maybe instead of dying tomorrow, I will die today. That's all. I know I am not going to live for a hundred years. But I want to live until this mosque gets completed. I am selfish about

that. Once my task is over and my mosque is finally built, let anyone kill me. That's what I feel. Now you look at the next generation, women maybe educated and have jobs, and can progress in life. But this attitude, this way of viewing women, that'll never change. To change that is our responsibility. So if we create this space for women, the next generation will take care of it. To achieve that we have to strain ourselves in every way. I have got into this with that kind of compulsion. (...)

Lakshmi: Sharifa, you went to Gujarat⁶³² in 2002 after the communal riots. What was your experience? What do you think women should do to bring about communal harmony?

Sharifa: In Gujarat — In '92 after the masjid demolition in Ayodhya⁶³³, I got letters from friends saying the situation was like this and I should watch out. I could not understand anything. Why are they saying so? There is nothing serious. Why do they say so? The Masjid has been demolished. So whether a masjid is built there or a temple, what does it matter? Let them build a school there. Why do these two communities clash? Then I raised a question, "After the masjid was razed down, you spoke at length about minority rights. But about the rape of so many women why didn't any organisation speak?" That was my question. But before this Gujarat issue we had held a Human Rights Workshop. Soon after the Gujarat riots. Then Balagopal of Andhra, a Human Right Activist, he told us. But we could not believe what he said. Even then we thought, 'Let us go and see. We will go and show our solidarity.' But it was only after we went there that we found out that even a very cruel, sadist person, after a visit to Gujarat will come back destroyed. We returned feeling that way. Such a horrible... When we entered Gujarat, in Ahmedabad⁶³⁴ we could make out nothing. We asked them where the riots took place. "Oh! You go to the refugee camp. Go and see there." And that hurt me. In my own country what is a refugee camp? A refugee camp is a place where outsiders come and seek refuge. Those words alienating me from my own country — that shattered us completely.

Secondly, when we went there and saw those women, what I felt was — kill a person if you want to. 'You are not needed, you die. You are Muslims; our country would benefit only if you die' — we'll willingly die. But killing in such a cruel manner, in such a despicable way, nothing can be as bad. If you say gender-equality can be brought about only after such acts, I would want none of it. To chop off their breasts... the words of those women... I can't ... and secondly, they are staying in a refugee camp; a refugee camp situated in a burial ground. \ Women are restricted and made to sit at home. But these women were sitting in the burial ground.

They're sitting there and cooking. And what was even more heart rending was, inspite of all the horrors, we were able to listen to them and bear it; and that on a stone stove, they made tea and offered us. Such a community was considered unnecessary for the country, considered traitors, asked to leave. What can we say when from a small child to an adult mete out this cruelty? And what was even more difficult to accept was that the State played a main role in all this mayhem.

⁶³² Gujarat: Indian state located in western India, bordered by Pakistan to the northwest.

⁶³³ Ayodhya: Ancient city in India location of Babri Masjid (see footnote 41 above).

⁶³⁴ Ahmedabad: The largest city in the state of Gujarat.

After I returned — I have been working for the past 15 years here. But regarding a woman in distress, I never asked whether she was a Muslim or a Hindu. Then the other question that came to my mind was why, in such a terrible situation, no Human Rights organisations raised any question about it. Why was there no struggle? No one said, so many women've been killed; we want to protest against it. Nobody observed even a day's fast. It troubled me a lot and I felt very insecure after I returned. Two of my friends had come to see me in Pudukottai. I spoke about all this, what had happened and so on. When I was speaking, a third person came along. Unconsciously, I lowered my voice. Why? Usually, when something happens, I would be screaming Why can't I speak aloud now? Why did my voice go down when another person came? I was talking about atrocities committed then why did I lower my voice? That set me thinking. If we, who call ourselves and are recognised as Human Rights Activists and feminists feel this way, how'd an ordinary Muslim feel? We have to think of that. (...)

If you look at religion itself — I don't choose to be born in this family, or religion. Whatever the religion. So if I reach a particular age they should ask me, "You are born in this family. Do you want to be a follower of this religion or live a secular life?" such a question should be asked. But the space for that — a society which grudges giving the smallest right to woman, it will take ages before such a question is put to a girl. But this question should be raised. I feel that dialogue about such a question must be there. (...)

Lakshmi: Sharifa, would you call yourself a feminist? In your opinion, what is feminism?

Sharifa: I have never said in so many words that I am a feminist. But my action is informed by feminist thinking, I feel. A girl must consider her self-respect, her mind, her thoughts, and decisions to live her own life, as her responsibility. Likewise, her life and all happenings are within the framework of this society. 'I have the right to all the privileges and recognition accorded in the society. I have to demand it.' That feeling should be there. Another thing is, when a woman realizes the status given to her by her family, her religion and her society, there is no stopping that woman. Only then, you can say that she is emerging with true feminist thinking.

So things like this — that women must receive genuine social recognition, there should be possibilities for this message to reach all women and be absorbed.

Every girl should be able to determine the way, she wants to live, saying, "My life. I must live it." Once this reaches home, I believe that the work and thoughts of feminists and their action will be genuine and fully evolved.
(...)

Lakshmi: Sharifa, in the life you have chosen to lead, how much space is there for things like friendship and marriage?

Sharifa: Marriage and friendship... in the life I led... when I came out of this community— I got a new life. I wanted to keep the gains of meeting women and talking to them. I thought of nothing but this.

When it comes to marriage, there is a need for a good companion. If I choose a good companion, I can do it only through marriage because there are so many women who come to seek my help and their lives should not be affected. I have already told in an interview. The minimum I expect is a man who understands my life and me well. I have no other demands. Someone acceptable. Life must run smooth. If I get companion like that, I will not resist. I have already crossed many barriers. Now if I choose a life I don't have to ask my mother or my elder sister for their approval. Even if they object, I don't have to worry. I will not feel upset that I have defied them. I have gone past that stage.

Lakshmi: You said that you were very fond of plants since childhood.

Sharifa: Yes.

Lakshmi: Is it because of that love that you built this house?

Sharifa: Since childhood I have been fond of village life. When I used to study in school, these girls would come with lots of flowers on their hair. My house was close to my school. They would open their tiffin boxes and keep the food in the lid and eat and I would be tempted. So I would go home, take a tiffin box and eat like them. That life — and those flowers in their hair — as I grew up, I had a longing to live in a village and come to town for work. I was enamoured of rural life. I would exchange my idli for millet rice. That life... to live in a village... I used to long for a life partner who hailed from a village. I used to think that my life would be happy this way.

Lakshmi: Do you have any intention of building a mosque here?

Sharifa: We are looking for a plot. We are short of funds. If I do not get any place elsewhere, I have decided to build it here, because who will manage this place after me? I will leave it to these women. So long as I am there... generally our experience has been... either there is attack on character or life. Regarding character, I have crossed that bridge so many times that I am used to it. Then the question of life. Instead of tomorrow, I may die today. One is scared of only these two things in life. When one is not bothered about both, what is there to think?