

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS PROJECT  
PODCAST SERIES:  
CONTEXTUALIZING FEMINIST VOICES**

**SITE: INDIA**

**Transcript of Jayati Lal  
Interviewer: Kristin McGuire**

**Location: Ann Arbor, USA**

**Date: May 21, 2021**

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**Intro:** This podcast series, *Contextualizing Feminist Voices*, is designed to provide background information for people using the Global Feminisms Project website. The podcasts aim to provide users with a well-informed perspective on interesting aspects of the interviews from a particular country. For each episode one of the project staff interviews an expert on that country site.

**Kristin McGuire:** Welcome to this episode of *Contextualizing Feminist Voices*. My name is Kristin McGuire. In this episode, I am talking with Professor Jayati Lal, who was one of the site coordinators for India, and who will provide some perspective on the interviews with Indian feminists. Jayati, the first thing I want to ask you is if you could talk about one or two themes that come up in the interviews that users should pay close attention to, themes that are particularly important in India's women's movement, scholarship, or activism.

**Jayati Lal:** One of the issues that emerges from the interviews is that there is a through line across generations and through different periods of activism, on violence against women in India. I'm using this more broad, expansive term to encompass forms of structural violence, such as those caused by the mass dispossession of land and dispersal of peasant and tribal communities by globalized neoliberal development policies; gender-based violence, such as dowry killings, female feticide, female infanticide, and domestic violence; and also sexual violence, such as rape and other sexual assaults. Debates on the law and sexual violence have been central to the women's movement since the 1970s, when the campaign to support a tribal girl who was raped by policemen, which became known as the Mathura rape case, gained national prominence in the 1970s, and is widely considered to be a turning point for the Indian women's movement as it marked the beginning of coordinated national campaigns and activism. Flavia Agnes discusses this case in her interview. Ima Devi's interview, for example, brings up the issue of custodial rape by federal soldiers in the northeastern state of Manipur that is under control of the Indian Army, and the protest against this by Manipuri women in the 1980s. Shahjehan Aapa's activism against dowry killing emerges from the murder of her own daughter in the 1980s. Lata PM's interview demonstrates, on the other hand, how feminist activism wasn't always necessarily located in gender-based organizations and campaigns. An environmental activist who was then the convener of the National Alliance for People's Movements, which is an umbrella organization that emerged in 1990s, after the wave of violence and unrest following the 1992 [destruction] of the Babri Masjid historic mosque, Lata has been vitally involved at the intersection of all these issues.

So the rubric of 'violence against women' encompasses many different issues and importantly, significant debates about religious and caste identity in politics have often surfaced in this context. Scholarship and theorizing on the intertwining of sexual and structural violence, such as caste-based sexual violence and power rapes, has been an important aspect of this activism. And understanding this as a collectivized sexual violence perpetrated by communities, state agents, and caste groups, targeted most particularly at Dalit and tribal women, is key to resisting the framing of religious- and caste-based violence as separate from sexual violence. So, the identity politics and struggles of feminists around for example, the Uniform Civil Code that Flavia Agnes brought up in her second interview was really productive because she has that sort of retrospective perspective and being able to extend the interviews, which ended in 2006,

into a later period. She discusses the issues of identity politics that arose, not only in the 1990s but following that as well, with the rise of the religious Hindu right during the 1990s, the Gujarat pogrom in 2002, the massacre of Muslims, all of these issues have animated feminism because of various critical events that have occurred that demanded a political response by feminists who were at the forefront, not only in feminist organizations, but also as members of various civil society groups that drafted reports, eyewitness accounts, for example, the People's Union for Civil Liberties, which, along with other organizations has also worked on issues of rape and sexual assault. So, a reader of the archive should be really attuned to the various locations that feminists are in, and of feminist politics in organizations that may not necessarily be focused on gender.

**KM:** That's a helpful introduction, thank you. We've learned that some topics that would be illuminating about the women's movement in a particular setting don't get covered in interviews for a variety of reasons. Are there any topics that you'd like to point out for users to notice that are actually missing from the interviews?

**JL:** I would say that the biggest gap and silence is around the issue of caste, and I want to note the absence of Dalit feminists in the archive. While there are some references in the personal biographies of the interviewees on their caste background, the archive is largely silent on caste as an issue in feminist activism and organizing. On the one hand, this reflects the historical generation that these activists represent: the oldest were born in the pre-Independence period in the 1920s. This is Mahasweta Devi, Neera Desai, and Vina Mazumdar, all of whom are no longer with us. While the younger generation were born in the early to mid 60s such as D. Sharifa and Jarjum Ete with the rest falling somewhere in between those two periods. So we see this trend nationally in dominant accounts of Indian feminism, which is partially reflected among the interviewees, of a much greater diversity in activists' backgrounds from upper and middle class, Hindu, English speaking, and largely urban based in the first and second waves of feminism, to activists who are Muslim and Christian, and from rural and working class and lower caste backgrounds, who were active in the 1980s onwards in what's considered to be the third wave of Indian feminism. For example, PM Lata has a poignant account in her interview of growing up poor and of her awakening recognition of her lower caste as a child when she begins to see the way in which her mother is being treated by community members. But this linear progress narrative of increased caste, class, religious, biographical diversity over generations is itself reductive, because it focuses primarily on activists who have gained national and public visibility and recognition, while Dalit feminists, who were also active, are not as visible in or represented by mainstream feminism. So I would stress that the interviews need to be read in this context, or they risk a celebratory retrospective account of feminism, that erases the presence of minority feminisms from the very beginning of the first wave of feminists in the nationalist movement.

On the other hand, and in addition to the historical erasure and exclusion of Dalit feminists' voices, the absence of caste in the archive also reflects the historical moment when the interviews were recorded, up until the mid-2000s. There has been an explosion in the public visibility of Dalit and other minority feminisms in the last two decades in reaction to the exclusion of Savarna or upper caste feminism. [This] democratization of feminism—via blogs, electronic zines, and more recently social media—has provided an

important autonomous Dalit feminist cultural and political space for the self-representation of Dalit women's experiences, forms of knowledge production, and platforms for activism. But it's important to note that this recent, more public face of Dalit feminism is merely a more visible and radical feminist politics that was already present in earlier periods.

**KM:** Thank you very much.

**Outro:** Thank you for listening to this episode of *Contextualizing Feminist Voices* created by the Global Feminisms Project. The entire podcast team hopes it will help you understand and enjoy the materials on the website. If you liked this episode, check out the other podcasts in this series, as well as materials about countries, teaching resources, and interviews.