

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

SITE: INDIA

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

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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 Navarati, 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