

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

**SITE: CROSS-SITE
(INDIA & UNITED STATES)**

**Transcript of Urvashi Butalia
Interviewer: Jayati Lal**

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Urvashi Butalia, born in 1952, is a co-founder of Kali for Women, India's first feminist publishing house that was founded in 1984. In 2003, Urvashi launched a new venture, Zubaan, which is an imprint of Kali. She obtained her undergraduate and master degrees in literature from Delhi University, and a Master's in South Asian Studies from the University of London in 1977. She has worked as an editor at the Oxford University Press and Zed Press Books for several years, and has also held a position of reader at the college of vocational studies at Delhi University for over 20 years where she taught book publishing.

Urvashi is very active in the Indian women's movement, and is a dedicated civil rights activist as well. She has also edited and authored several books, including the anthology, *Speaking Peace: Women's Voice from Kashmir*, and with Tanika Sarkar, *Women and the Hindu Right*. She is the co-author with Ritu Menon of *Making a Difference: Feminist Publishing in the South*, and author of *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*. She has won several awards for her work, among them the Nikai Asia Prize for Culture in 2003 in Japan for her work as an author and co-founder of Kali for Women; the Oral History Association Book Award in 2001 in the U.S. for *The Other Side of Silence*, and the Pandora Women in Publishing Award in 2000 in the UK.

Jayati Lal is a faculty member in Sociology, Women's Studies, and South Asian Studies. Her teaching and research is interdisciplinary and is situated at the intersection of area and gender studies. Her research focuses on working class women who are factory workers in the garment and television manufacturing industries in Delhi. She has done extensive interviewing and ethnographic research in workers' homes and workplaces to capture the lifeworlds and subjectivities of 'factory women,' and their changing gender identities. She is currently completing a book length manuscript on this project.

Urvashi Butalia Transcript

Jayati Lal: Hi, I'm Jayati Lal, and we're here today at the University of Michigan with Urvashi Butalia. Welcome, Urvashi.

Urvashi Butalia: Thanks, Jayati.

Jayati: And thanks for coming. And also thanks for agreeing to do the Global Feminisms Interview.

Urvashi: Thank you. It's nice to be here.

Jayati: Urvashi Butalia is a co-founder of Kali for Women, India's first feminist pub—feminist publishing house that was founded in 1984. In 2003, Urvashi launched a new venture, Zubaan,¹ which is an imprint of Kali. She obtained her undergraduate and master degrees in literature from Delhi University, and a Master's in South Asian Studies from the University of London in 1977. She has worked as an editor at the Oxford University Press and Zed Press Books for several years, and has also held a position of reader at the college of vocational studies at Delhi University for over 20 years where she taught book publishing. Urvashi is very active in the Indian women's movement, and is a dedicated civil rights activist as well. She writes on issues relating to gender, communalism, fundamentalism and the media. Her writing has appeared in several newspapers, including *The Guardian*, *The Statesmen*, *The Times of India*, *Hindustan Times* and several magazines, including *Outlook*, *The New Internationalist*, and *India Today*. Her main areas of research are gender and history, and more particularly, the Partition² and oral history. And she has published various articles and essays in local and international journals. Urvashi has edited and authored several books, including the anthology, *Speaking Peace: Women's Voice from Kashmir*, and with Tanika Sarkar, *Women and the Hindu Right*. She is the co-author with Ritu Menon of *Making a Difference: Feminist Publishing in the South*, and author of *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, the critically acclaimed and path-breaking chronicle of the untold stories of partition, which has been translated into several languages including Chinese and Japanese. She has won several awards for her work, among them, the Nikai Asia Prize for Culture in 2003 in Japan, for her work as an author and co-founder of Kali for Women; the Oral History Association Book Award in 2001 in the U.S. for *The Other Side of Silence*, and the Pandora Women in Publishing Award in 2000 in the UK.

Jayati: Urvashi, what we'd like to do today is basically talk for about an hour or a little more, time permitting, to talk about your work, your life, starting from the beginning, if possible. But also, more particularly, with your engagement with feminism and the

¹ Zubaan is an independent feminist publishing house based in New Delhi, India. It was set up as an imprint of the well known feminist press, Kali for Women. "Zubaan" means tongue, voice, language, or speech in Hindustani. See <<http://www.zubaanbooks.com/>>

² The partition of India into India and Pakistan, which was the fallout of independence from the British on August 15, 1947, was a very politically-loaded move, 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.

women's movement in India over time, as it sort of has intersected with the various projects that you've done over time, to give us a sense of how your engagements have changed, but also how the movement itself and feminism and the landscape for feminism in India has changed over time. So now what I'd like to do is to start off with your personal history and some more biographical questions, and to just ask you: Where were you born? Where did you grow up? Where did you go to school?

Urvashi: Well, I guess this is the point at which you start, like an autobiography, "I was born and I came into the world," and so on. I was born in Punjab in a place called Ambala. And my parents are both Partition refugees who came across at different times from what became Pakistan. I spent the first ten years of my life in Ambala. And my dad, who used to be a journalist, moved from Ambala where he worked with a newspaper called *The Tribune* to Delhi in the early '60s, and we followed him a year later. So I still remember coming into the big city. I think it was 1961, 16th of December, late at night, getting off a train at the station. And it was a big, big thing for us to arrive in Delhi. But suddenly arriving in the big city meant settling in very much smaller spaces, because in Ambala, we had, you know, sprawling house and all sorts of things, and this was a big change. So I guess now you could say that I am a Delhi person.

Jayati:Um-hum.

Urvashi: I went to school there, I went to university there, I started my first job there, I've been living there pretty much all my life.

Jayati:Um-hum. Now, you mentioned that both your parents came over from Pakistan at different points in time. Can you tell us a little bit about how that timing worked and...

Urvashi: Yes, it was...

Jayati:...it was still India at the time, at some...you know, before...

Urvashi: Yes.

Jayati: ...'47, so...

Urvashi: It was still India at the time. My mother actually came over quite bravely, alone to work in a job as a teacher in Nabha, which is a small town in Punjab. And she came in '46 or thereabouts. At the time, both she and my father knew each other and they were planning to marry. But they weren't sure, you know, what was come of their lives, and so she had got this job, she came across to teach. And then when Partition became imminent, she went back alone again to Lahore³ twice to fetch the rest of her family, which was her mother and her two brothers and a sister. So she came back one time with a brother and a sister. Then she went back very close to Partition to fetch her mother and other brother who did not come back. And the brother wanted to stay on and he kept the mother back because the property was in her name. And that later became the subject of my book...

³ City in the Punjab region of Pakistan

Jayati: Yes.

Urvashi: ...on Partition. My father, excitingly, stayed on in Lahore till the night of the 14th of August, 1947. He used to work for *The Tribune*, a newspaper which was then based there. And they put the last edition of the paper to bed, a handful of men who had stayed behind, and next morning they got onto the delivery truck and crossed the border. And then he came into India and came by Amritsar and Delhi and went up to Simla, where *The Tribune* was then housed, because the owner of *The Tribune* had moved to Simla.⁴ And it was there that my parents got married. They had a sort of quite unusual run-away marriage because my dad, being the son of fairly wealthy parents and my mother being on her own, it wasn't a suitable match. But then, you know, his parents had got him engaged to a young woman and informed him that it was time he came back to marry her, which is when he wrote to my mother saying, "For God's sake, do something! I'll be married off." So she came running to Simla and they got married. And then they lived there for a while and then he moved to Ambala where the newspaper moved. And that's where we were born, myself, my elder brother, and we grew up there.

Jayati: So were your parents from the same community?

Urvashi: Well, my father is a Sikh⁵, or was a Sikh. He died three years ago. But he was from a family of Hindus in whom the tradition is to donate or give the first...the eldest son to Sikhism. It has an old history in Punjab, and it...there is a lot of intermarrying. So our family...my father's name is a Sikh name.

Jayati: Was he the eldest son?

Urvashi: He was the eldest son, and he wore a turban up till he was about 20 years old, and then he claims that he became bald and he gave up the turban. I don't know if that's the truth. My mother is from a Pahari-Punjabi⁶ community. She actually belongs to Kullu⁷. But, you know, the Sikh and Hindu identities are so closely meshed together in many ways that there's a lot of intermarriage. And if there's ever been any religion in our family, it's really been Sikhism, not...not Hinduism.

Jayati: What about the sort of language that you grew up...or languages, as is often the case in India, that you grew up with? At home and in school?

Urvashi: It's very interesting. You know, a lot of Indian children grow up with more than one language. I think we were extremely privileged in that. Because we went to English Medium

⁴ Simla is the capital of the state of Himachal Pradesh in northern India.

⁵ Sikhism is a subset of Hinduism.

⁶ Pahari (also known as Pahaari), is a general term for various dialects spoken in the Indian part of the central Himalayan range. The word is derived from 'pahar' or 'pahad' meaning 'mountain'. The term 'Pahaari/Pahari' in Hindi, Urdu, or Punjabi means "language of the mountain people. It is noteworthy that most people consider pahari language to be same or just a variant of Punjabi. Colloquially, Pahari also refers descriptively to someone from the hills.

⁷ Kullu is the capital town of the Kullu district, in the state of Himachal Pradesh, India. It is located on the banks of the Beas River in the Kullu Valley about ten kilometres north of the airport at Bhuntar.

schools⁸. But my parents always spoke Hindi with us, always. And they always spoke Punjabi with each other and with my grandmother who lived with us. So I actually as a child didn't realize what a privilege it was. But when I grew up, I realize that I had total fluency in these three languages—English, Hindi and Punjabi, and I could read Hindi. I could write in Hindi, I could read English, write in English. I couldn't read Punjabi, although I could speak it. So I think it was at age 24 or 25 that I taught myself to read it by simply buying a primer, learning the alphabet. And because I knew the language, it was very easy to string the alphabets together, and I actually started to read. I still don't write in *Gurmukh*⁹, but I can read it.

Jayati:Um-hum.

Urvashi: So we grew up with these three languages.

Jayati: And then you decided to stay in Delhi for your college. How did you make that decision and what did you do? You went into English. So...so...

Urvashi: Yeah.

Jayati:I think that's interesting.

Urvashi: I studied...I studied English literature in...for my BA and for my MA.

Jayati: And your BA was in Miranda House¹⁰.

Urvashi: Miranda House in Delhi University. But it was...there was never any question of my going anywhere else. I mean, I didn't...it didn't even enter my head to say, do what a lot of middle class kids do these days, which is to travel abroad and study. Somehow it just didn't enter my head and I don't think that at the end of that process of studying in India I came out any worse than anyone who might have gone to, say, an American university and learned perhaps more or less, I don't know. I studied English literature. I did my Master's degree in it. By the time I had finished at university and had done my Master's degree, I was really fed up to here with English literature. I thought I've had it with Milton and Spencer. They've broadened my outlook in life, but, you know, they make no sense to me living in the back streets of Delhi and working there. And so I decided that I would not teach, which was the expected occupation for somebody who had come out of an English literature background. And all my teachers wanted me to teach. But I just decided, no, I'm not going to teach. I'm not going to go back to Shakespeare and Milton and Spencer and so on. And so I looked around for wo—jobs, and what came up, purely by accident, was a publishing job, which is what became my life. So...

⁸ As opposed to a vernacular medium school where the primary language of learning is the language of the state or any other Indian language, depending on which group has established the school.

⁹ Many write Punjabi in the Gurmukhi script which was introduced by Guru Angad Dev in the 16th century. Gurmukhi is a simplified script that contains ten vowels and forty consonants. The script is written just as you would speak the language.

¹⁰ One of India's leading women's residential colleges that is affiliated to Delhi University;founded in 1948.

Jayati: Somewhere in there is a history as well about your political awakening, between the undergraduate and the job. If you could talk about that.

Urvashi: There is a history. You know the Delhi University in the late '60s when I joined it, I joined in '68 and I was there till '73, was a very exciting place. And it was a very exciting time politically. There were a lot of political movements in the country, particularly the Naxalites,¹¹ to the left, to...

Jayati: With J.P. Narayan too?

Urvashi: Yes. And the Naxalite Movement and there was the influence of Jay Prakash Narayan¹² and his Sarvodaya Movement¹³ and all of us were touched by that. And the university was a hive of, you know, marches and demonstrations and political meetings going on all the time. Many of my contemporaries actually left university to go underground and join the left movement. I never had that kind of courage actually. When I started at university I was quite a political innocent. Gradually I got interested and involved. By the time I had spent four years there, I was actually leader of the students' union in my college. And we were taking up issues like safe travel for women within the university, hostile conditions for women within the university. We were in the sort of...in the midst of an agitation against beauty contests and the commoditization of women. And really to me the measure of my politicization is that in first...in my first year, I actually participated in the beauty contest, because all freshers¹⁴ were supposed to. I hated it.

Jayati: I was coerced into it too.

Urvashi: I was pushed into it. I hated standing up on that stage and wearing a sari and feeling unsteady in my heels and...And because I, you know, I...you always think of yourself as some kind of really horrible looking, acne-faced youngster. So up there in a beauty contest, you feel a bit strange. But by the time I had spent three years in college, I had begun to understand the politics behind the commoditization, objectification of women. So I was in the movement to oppose beauty contests also. And one of the things that we were also in the forefront of was the move to become part of the Delhi University Students' Union, which was a union made up of students from all over the university, but which in some ways the women's colleges and the better colleges did not join.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Urvashi: Because it was felt to be dirty politics.

Jayati: Because they were affiliated to national-level parties. Is that right?

¹¹ Naxalite: A left wing, revolutionary militant movement, originating in Naxalbari in 1967. It is distributed across nine states in India and has a history of violence conflict with ruling governments.

¹² Jayaprakash Narayan (October 11, 1902 - October 8, 1979), widely known as JP, was an Indian freedom fighter and political leader, remembered especially for leading the opposition to Indira Gandhi in the 1970s.

¹³ Land redistribution movement based on Mahatma Gandhi's *sarvodaya* (rural "uplift") philosophy, which advocated community sharing of all resources for mutual benefit and enhancement of peasant life.

¹⁴ First-year students.

Urvashi: They were and they weren't. They weren't so overtly affiliated at that time. But, yes, national level parties weren't absent. But that was 'real' politics, as opposed to the little bits and pieces of stuff, you know, college stuff. So, and especially the women's colleges did not join it. So I was part of that also. And I think all of that led to my politicization, although I didn't...I have to say that I didn't have the courage to ever go underground, to leave college, drop out of university, join the left movement or anything like that. But it was a broad left framework within which I cut my political teeth, if you like. And subsequently, that was what propelled me into the women's movement. Which was very nascent at that time, but which came into its own in the mid-70s.

Jayati: So you've used the term underground a couple of times. And yet this is also a period that is pre-Emergency. So I would imagine that that would be more appropriate for a post-Emergency or Emergency period. So when you talk about the left, are you really talking about the more radical left, in terms of the Naxalites?

Urvashi: I'm talking about the Naxalite...

Jayati: Yeah.

Urvashi: ...Movement. Because many of my contemporaries left university and joined the Naxalite Movement.

Jayati: Okay.

Urvashi: And we always looked on them with great awe and admiration, you know, doing something that all of us should have had the courage to do, but didn't. So that's how I...when I look back on it, that's what I remember. That's what I mean by underground.

Jayati: How did the Emergency affect all of this? This fear of activism. In a sense it fed it quite a bit, right? And radicalized what might have seemed like innocent campus politics into a larger national discursive frame, right? of politics?

Urvashi: Yes, very much it did do that. But it also had the effect of actually pushing it completely into the background, because it became much more dangerous to be involved in this kind of activity during the Emergency. In the early days, people were not...not quite sure of the gravity of the Emergency. So what would happen was that they would continue with their political activity in a much more vociferous way. But many of them got thrown into jail and that had the result of actually pushing a lot of it out of the public arena. Very interestingly, what happened was that the women's movement was just beginning to grow at that time. And in an odd kind of way, the State--Mrs. Gandhi's government--the state, did not think that we were any danger to anybody. And so while all other political movements were clamped down upon, women's activism, which wasn't out so much in the streets at the time, but it was beginning to happen, that sort of thing was allowed to...some...a little bit of space and some free rein. And I think that it's only much later that they realize that this could be something that could be threatening to the status quo. But at that time, it was a...it was an odd kind of space that women's movements gained during and post-Emergency.

Jayati: Um-hum. And that's very understandable and certainly meshes with seeing feminist work as less threatening or women's issues. So this is also the time then that you joined or created, while you were still in college, a couple of groups. Samtha you've talked about before, and Stree Sangarsh.

Urvashi: Yeah. It's...actually these groups came, yeah, just at the, you know, time when I was finishing college. We...a lot of people involved in working with women in Delhi were beginning to feel the need to come together in some way. And so in the -- I think it was around '75, I can't remember the exact date -- we got together with the help of one of the veterans of the women's movement in India called Vina Mazumdar¹⁵, who was at that time working with the Indian Council of Social Science Research, and who was one of the authors of this really path-breaking report called "Towards Equality," which was published at the end of '74 and which sort of mapped the status of women in India post-Independence, and came out with some very startling conclusions about how things had been getting worse for women. So Vina Mazumdar, known to all of us affectionately as Vinadi, offered young women a space inside the premises of the Indian Council of Social Science Research where we could meet and talk. And we formed a group called *Samtha*, which was like an umbrella group. And the magazine *Manushi*¹⁶ was one of the projects of Samtha. It was Samtha which started, or which took the decision to publish a magazine, and that...gave it a name, and that was *Manushi*, and several of us became part of the original editorial collective. So I was one of the people of the original editorial collective. But gradually over a period of time we kind of fell apart, and I left the magazine after the first issue was published. And during that time, some of us who had been with *Manushi* got together to form a group called Stree Sangarsh. And Stree Sangarsh was then very, very active in the anti-dowry and the anti-rape movements in Delhi. Among its key activities was a street play -- well, two street plays, one on rape and one on dowry, which were widely, widely used and, you know, taken all over the Delhi. So that was quite an experience for us also to get involved in street theater.

Jayati: And...and then from there, in a sense then were those two groups like the first organized groups that you were a part of, that had a distinct identity with a name that you can now look back on as some sort of a starting point in terms of the growth of different groups in Delhi?

Urvashi: Yeah. I think it's always different to...it's always difficult to put, you know, a precise beginning...

Jayati: Yeah. Yeah.

Urvashi: ...to certain...to activism -- When did this begin? I would say, yes, to some extent you're right, that these groups for people like me were what pushed us into feminist political activity. But I would say that the consciousness of that for me started much earlier in college. You know, had it not been for the fact that I went to a college which was located inside the university campus that was...that I was studying at a time, which was a time of great political ferment and upheaval and activity and so on, had it not been that I got involved in the students' union, that

¹⁵ See Global Feminisms (India) interview with Vina Mazumdar.

¹⁶ For more on *Manushi*, see Global Feminisms (Cross-site) interview with Ruth Vanita.

the early issues that we took up were all women's issues, I don't think...And had it not been for the fact that many of us at that time, when we were in the university, read a lot...

Jayati: Um-hum. Um-hum.

Urvashi: ...and we read actually a lot about the western feminist movement.

Jayati: Was this in study groups? Or was this in part of courses' required assignments...?

Urvashi: Not courses at all. In study groups and independently, and we individually shared books, you know. So we read people like Sheila Rowbotham¹⁷, we read...I can't now remember - lots of books. We used to just exchange them, because we were poor, we couldn't afford to buy these books. So I think that that gave us a fairly solid grounding. And in a sense I'm always grateful for that, you know. The thing is that the Indian Women's Movement is always accused of being a follower to the western movement, always accused of coming...of being a "poor cousin," a "second cousin". And people say that our movements grew out of the western movements. And I think this is a load of nonsense actually. It's very clear that there is...there are political trajectories, which lead us to where we got to. But I think also that we had the privilege of learning and reading about other movements, from which we learned a great deal. And very often I feel that western movements don't have that...that privilege in reverse. Because they never thought we had anything to offer. So they never learned from us.

Jayati: Looked to us...

Urvashi: Looked to us...

Jayati: ...for...a history.

Urvashi...That's right. Whereas we actually have grown up with that history. You know, so if you were to ask me to look at the differences between radical feminism and reformist feminism and revolutionary and socialist feminism, I could tell you those. But if you were to ask somebody, you know, in...who's been involved in the western movement to look at the influence of Gandhi-ism or Confucianism, or this, that and the other in our movements, I don't think they would really be able to talk about that. So in that sense I think we were very, very privileged to be growing up at a time which propelled us into women's activism in this way.

Jayati: So it wasn't only those groups, but it goes back quite a bit further. Um-hum. So actually this is really good segue, simply because I would like to talk a little bit about the early issues that the Indian Women's Movement addressed. And it seems to me that certainly this is something that you've written about, that violence was really a very key issue. But it's also true that violence and the way it was dealt with in those years, and the

¹⁷ She is a professor of sociology at the University of Manchester, UK. She co-founded the Women's Liberation Movement in Britain in the early 1970s and was one of a small group who pioneered women's history. She worked at the Greater London Council in the early 1980s developing economic and social policy and editing a newspaper for the Economic Policy Unit called "Jobs for a Change." During the 1980s she worked as a consultant for the United Nations University's World Institute for Economic Research (WIDER).

specific issues around violence are quite different from those that are taken up today. Could you maybe talk about that? And sort of...

Urvashi: Yeah.

Jayati: ...think...or even more generally about the themes that you think were prevalent then or key then, and how that's been changed, changing over time.

Urvashi: Well, I think violence, as you say, has always been an issue. And it was one of the first issues taken up by women's groups in India, particularly as it related to the issue of rape, and as it related to the issue of dowry and dowry death. But also widow immolation, and also things like the environment, and what was happening with women. Especially the Chipko Movement¹⁸ was one of the big movements that...that happened at the time. Class, the issues of how patriarchy functioned inside political formations in which women were then in great numbers. So for example, peasant movements or left movements. Women were raising issues of patriarchy and violence within those. So in some ways, yes, there were major issues. But now when I look back, I often think that the ways in which we chose to address those issues were perhaps appropriate to the time, but also deeply flawed in some ways. You know, partly we were always only reacting, and then we were always only reacting to the symptoms that we saw, and therefore not addressing the root of the problem ever. And partly for many women of my class, middle class women who were involved in the women's movement, the initial entry was something that, you know, we...we came with this assumption that we were in there to solve the problems of other women. We never questioned ourselves. We never thought, well, what is that leads us here? What are our own issues, our own problems? We didn't talk about those. It was an almost kind of welfare-ist type of approach. And there were women among us who were much more political, whose understanding was much deeper politically. But somehow we all never talked about ourselves. That was taboo. We talked about the other women that we were working with.

Jayati: And their problems.

Urvashi: And their problems. And I think it took us many, many years to get over that, and it was very painful education to learn that when you are actually involved in a political movement which is so close to the bone, which is so much a part of your everyday life, that you cannot separate the personal from the political in any way, you have to think about yourself as well. You cannot be a do-gooder, you cannot be a hero, you cannot be a leader who's out there solving other people's problems without addressing how you're implicated in those.

Jayati: Um-hum. I see. Do you think that perception or understanding in any way affected the kinds of issues around violence, or other issues that the women's movement dealt with?

Urvashi: Yes, I think it did in many ways. And I think not only that perception, but a whole range of other things, you know. If you allow me to jump a little bit...

Jayati: Um-hum.

¹⁸ In the 1970s and 1980s, a resistance to the destruction of forests spread throughout India and became known as the Chipko Movement. Using the Gandhian method non-violent resistance, villagers in North Indian states hugged trees in order to prevent their being cut down.

Urvashi: ...ahead, the...the '90s, or the late '80s in India are when the women's movement in India is at its peak. Everywhere there's tremendous activism, and everywhere issues are being taken up and we are in the newspapers every day. And, you know, the Tenth Plans¹⁹ are taking account of women, and women and development or gender and development is a big thing. So it's not...it's not an absence anymore. It's not...this is not to say that it's changing the lives of every...of all women in India. Clearly it isn't. The Indian reality is much more complex. But in the public discourse, it's not an absence anymore. And yet, there is a whole movement going on in Kashmir²⁰ or in the northeast of India where women are being violently impacted. And we don't ever address those issues. And why don't we address those issues? I mean, I don't know. My...my answer to that, or my take on that is that I think that even for women within the women's movement who have questioned, say, things like nationalism, the nation-state and how it is constituted and how it defines women's rights, somewhere in our hearts we also own that nationalism. So that, say, a movement in Kashmir, which is in theory an anti-nationalist movement, we don't turn towards the women in that movement because we feel they're betraying the nation some ways. So all those things rise up to the fore. So I think that in our understanding of violence as an issue that has been central in the women's movement, there have been many changes. And I think women are now beginning to understand, for example, the complex relationship between nationalism and sub-nationalist movements and how they're violent towards women and the need for solidarity and so on. So I think that in a sense, from looking on near the domestic space, we are moving and looking also outwards and seeing how it manifests, how violence manifests itself in...in many parts of our lives, and learning to address those with...with all the confusions and all the hesitations that we bring to this whole exercise.

Jayati: It's interesting, because in the case of rape, which was one of the first issues around violence that the movement took up, you would think that there's very natural lens to look at, especially because so much of that was statutory rape, you know, or women being raped while they were in custody, that it would sort of lead naturally to a critique of the State, and State-led violence against women, which is the sort of thing I think you meant when you talk about Kashmir, right? Because it's...the State itself is a perpetrator of...of violence to some degree. And yet in it, there's this blindness towards it. Do you think that part of that might also be the...perhaps we can attribute it to the so-called middle class bias in that era? But the tendency of, which you've mentioned of...of looking to...not sort of looking to the root of the problem but trying to solve on the symptoms of it, which in many cases led to looking to the State for solutions. That is, trying to go through the legal route. Or do you...

Urvashi: Yeah.

¹⁹ Indian economy is based on the concept of planning through five year plans that are developed, executed and monitored by the Planning Commission. There are ten of these plans, beginning with the first in 1951 that focused broadly across many issues including agriculture, community development, irrigation, transportation, and social services. Over the years, the plans have focused on relevant issues of the time including agriculture, industry, unemployment and poverty, village and cottage industries, and science and technology. The tenth five-year plan specifically addresses the empowerment of women.

²⁰ This area in the northwest of India has been the subject of dispute between India and Pakistan since the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. The area is severely contested and has been the site of several wars between Indian and Pakistan in 1947, 1965 and 1971.

Jayati: ...you not see these as connected?

Urvashi: Well, no, I think they are connected. I think actually that it's not that the women's movement did not critique the state. They...it did develop a fairly strong critique of the state, not only through the...the way the rape movement—the campaign against rape—took off, but also dowry, also others.

Jayati:Um-hum.

Urvashi: But in a...in a strange kind of way, the early movement, also as you quite rightly say, addressed the State. So it was a...in an essay that I wrote, I called it “Confrontation and Negotiation,” because we continue to confront the State, but we also continue to collaborate with it, to negotiate with it. And I think in those days, in the late '70s and the '80s, the Indian State, like all...many States elsewhere in the world, was also much more accountable, much more willing to be open to its citizens making certain demands on it, and much more answerable. It had not yet been corporatized and privatized in the way that it has now. So that...at that time, we could, for example, walk up to Parliament, take a memorandum, insist on meeting the highest of the high, and actually talk to them. Now you can't even get closet to the place. So in that sense, yes, there was a lot of, you know, this to-ing and fro-ing. There was also...for example, big questions about certain programs that were initiated such as Women's Development Program, which could not have been put in place without the help of women's groups. And within women's groups, there was a huge debate on ought we to collaborate with the State or not?

Jayati: Um-hum.

Urvashi: And of course some groups took the decision to collaborate with the State. Others were critical of it. Similarly, we lobbied for changes in the law, and we now...and we...we succeeded in changing the law on rape, changing the law on dowry and so on. Now when you look back, you realize that that was not enough. But I think that, you know, in a sense, one has to recognize that the women's movement is a movement that is constantly evolving, growing, thinking, changing and learning. Somehow people expect that because it talks about such radical change it will come into the world ready thought, ready prepared. But it's not...it's not like that. So the things we did in the '70s, it would be...take a very different approach today.

Jayati: You talked about sort of this awareness of how feminists themselves were part of the system, or implicated in it, and have them turn the lens inward in a sense, when you talked about the welfare-ist approach. It seems to me that this sort of reflexivity was certainly pushed upon women's groups around the issue of communal violence. And you have written a lot about that, and you talk, for example, about Flavia...or Flavia Agnes²¹...Agnes's critique about how the feminist movement hasn't recognized that they are sort of very embedded within a majoritarian discourse, because they tend to see themselves as secular, but actually are operating with a lot of sort of Hindu symbols. And we're going to get to talk about Kali²² later. But in an interesting sort of way, Kali becomes

²¹ See Global Feminisms (India) interview with Flavia Agnes.

²² Hindu goddess that is often associated with the destruction of (male) evil.

sort of symbolic of that, and the way in which those symbols take on a completely different meaning in the late '80s, right?

Urvashi: Yeah.

Jayati: But that...that too I guess is part of that...as you say, a sort of changing and shifting awareness, self awareness, because of issues that come up.

Urvashi: Yeah. I think the self awareness has, you know...in some ways the questioning has always been there, even from the early days. But I think it has been difficult to deal with the questioning. It's much easier now, because we are much more open and much more willing to acknowledge where those questions are coming from. For example, you know, in the days of Stree Sangarsh, it was a group made of women who were very much from within the left tradition, women who were within a very liberal tradition, women like my mother, who came from the old nationalist time. And women who were completely apolitical. And, you know, there were lot of clashes and differences. And I remember there were times when we tried to talk about this. And they were terrible, fearful, painful times. Because none of us was willing to make ourselves vulnerable to the others, because we thought, oh, this one who's got too much of leftist will critique me for being, you know, middle of the road, that sort of thing. Today I don't think we have those kinds of fears. And I think the movement is much more open. And that's why this whole questioning of its majoritarian nature, which Flavia raised in Calcutta many years ago, has not destroyed the movement and has not stopped dialogue across difference. Which is I think, you know, for example, in the western movement, when the Black Women's Movement critiqued White women's, let's say, within quotes, "imperialism" or whatever, suddenly you reach a point where there's a wall and you can't talk across that. Fortunately, it hasn't happened to us. We are still able to talk across our differences. We're still able to acknowledge our differences, and we are still able to acknowledge the privilege that comes with that. And try to...to, you know, work beyond that. So in that sense, I think it's been a very good thing.

Jayati: Actually, you've jumped head of me a little bit, because I was going to bring up the issues of difference as well. And then I'm going to go back to another last question. I wanted to talk about violence in relation to your work. But you've said recently at a keynote address, you spoke of what you called India's contradictions, and I'm going to quote: "At the heart of the contradiction stand Indian women. For it is true to say that they are amongst the most oppressed in the world, and it is equally true to say that they are among the most liberated, the most articulate, and perhaps even the most free. Can these two realities be simultaneously true?"²³ Now it seemed to me that you seem to be pointing directly to the internal differences that exist. And what that has meant over time for Indian feminism, the differences of caste, of class and the way in which that has been a very easy critique of the Indian women's movement. But even rural/urban language divides and so on, and of course, most particularly in the most recent sort of era, the issue of communalism.

²³ Global Women's History Conference: Women From India And Pakistan At WSC, Oct. 25-28," By Prof. Mara Dodge, in "Women's Studies at WSC" (Newsletter, September 2001, Vol. 2, No.1), Women's Studies Program, Parenzo Hall, Westfield State College <http://www.wsc.ma.edu/womenst/WSTNews09-01.PDF>

Urvashi: Um-hum.

Jayati: Can you give a brief sketch of perhaps some recent issue around where this awareness was really brought to the fore. I'm thinking of things much more contemporary than say Shah Bano²⁴ and maybe the 1992 riots in Bombay²⁵, or the...in the post-Babri Masjid²⁶...period, where you felt that the tenor of difference was something that...that was possible to overcome in the movement.

Urvashi: Well, yeah. Let me give you a completely different example.

Jayati: Okay.

Urvashi: All...of all the issues you've mentioned, and I have this bad habit of jumping ahead so you'll forgive me for...you haven't mentioned sexuality.

Jayati: Yeah.

Urvashi: Let me give you an example that comes directly from there...In recent years, the...you know, on the question of how to celebrate International Women's Day on the eighth of March, the tradition is that women's groups get together and they choose an issue, one or more, on which they then will have a march or a demonstration or a discussion or something, to be followed by a whole range of other activities. Some years ago, the issue that was decided upon was the issue of shelter. Because in Delhi particularly—and I'm talking of Delhi groups—a whole lot of workers had been dislocated from the factories in which they worked, because the idea was that those factories were polluting the environment.

Jayati: The Pollution Law.

Urvashi: Yeah. For middle class people. And so they were pushed out and they were...they lost their homes and so on. So we decided that we would take up the issue of shelter. And the idea was that all groups would collaborate. So the discussion that was taking place was between party-affiliated groups, particularly from the left parties, between what are called the autonomous independent groups. And among these autonomous independent groups were some lesbian groups. Particularly one group that calls itself CALERI, Campaign for Lesbian Rights in India. And at the last minute, what happened was, or not quite at the last minute, the left groups were extremely worried about having the lesbian groups in there, because CALERI's banner itself says, "Campaign for All Lesbian Rights in India," and this was supposed to be, I think, for, housing rights. So they...one thing is that they were worried about the wording of the banner, and the second thing is that they felt that they had not been able to raise the issue of sexuality with their cadres, and they did not want it to distract from the theme of the struggle, which is the old

²⁴ Shah Bano was a Muslim woman divorced by her husband. She sued him for alimony (Muslim law only allows for limited alimony post-divorce which only requires the husband's consent) and won the case in court. This ruling was followed by an outcry that Muslim personal laws were being encroached upon and engendered much controversy.

²⁵ Large-scale violence in Bombay between Hindus and Muslims, following the Babri Masjid destruction.

²⁶ A mosque in Delhi that was demolished by right-wing Hindu militants on December 6, 1992. Violence between Hindus and Muslims followed all over the country.

argument about, you know, how independent movements distract from the mainstream of the struggle. And it reached a point where the decision was taken that the CALERI and other lesbian groups would opt out, and they would not work with the left groups. And a number of autonomous groups also in support opted out. Others stayed in, and the demonstration was held. But subsequent to that, the dialogue resumed. And they have continued to talk about how to overcome this...this problem. Rather than saying, "Okay, we can't work with you, we can't work you. Stop. That's it."

And I think in this...to me the most valuable lesson actually came from a Sri Lankan woman, Suneela Abhisekhara, who was part of a team that investigated the Gujarat riots²⁷. It's part of an international women's team. And when she...when they came and presented their report, what Suneela said was, that she thought that Indian feminists, in order to deal with the issue of difference, could learn quite a lot from Sri Lankan feminists, where...in...when Sri Lankan feminists post-war had decided to raise the issue of women's rights in the peace agreement, they had found a lot of differences among their different groups, but they had decided that they need not take the decision for everybody to walk all the distance together. But if x or y says, "I can walk this much distance with you, because I share that part of what you're going to say, but I'm not going to walk with that other group," then you take them that distance and you carry on the journey and you don't stop it, you know. In a...in a metaphorical way, and also in a literal way, because they were going to walk across all of Sri Lanka gathering support. And she offered this to us as a way of overcoming..

Jayati: Thinking about...

Urvashi: ...the barriers of difference among us. And I thought that was a really valuable lesson. Because even though we have been open to it, there have been times when, you know, the rural/urban divide stops conversations. There have been times when Muslim and Hindu...those identities also come and divide up the women's movement. In a sense, I think what we've learned is that not to be romantic about the commonality of our experience as women. We know that it can be divided up by lots of other identities. And we know that every time that happens, we have to try and somehow deal with it.

Jayati: So here's one that's really hard to deal with though. And that is the -- and it's a significant difference, thinking about the way in which one theorizes about the commonality of experiences coming out of women, or the experience of being a woman. And that is, women as agents and perpetrators of violence.

Urvashi: Um-hum.

Jayati: And you've written a fair amount of this, the book that you edited on right wing women with Tanika Sarkar is about that. And again, I'm going to quote from an article of

²⁷ Also called Godhra riots in 2002. These are a series of riots and mob violence between Hindus and Muslims, triggered in 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.

yours where you say, “Until now the narratives of war and conflict have all constructed women as innocent civilians and men as combatants with little exception. And yet we see all around us today between those two binaries lies a complex reality, which shows how women and men are touched by war and conflict in very different ways.”²⁸ And this has been a really thorny issue, you know, thinking about women and the Hindu Right, and women’s complicity and active participation in communal violence. And could you sort of help us think through how Indian feminism has dealt with that issue.

Urvashi: Yes, well, it’s an issue that I’ve been very interested in and, I mean, a lot of people have written on it much more than I have done. Tanika Sarkar, for example, Uma Chakraborty and others have really dealt in detail with the issue. I think the fact of what we call communalism-- which is really religion-based identity politics as we know it in India--and how it divided up even women’s groups was something that really I think shook us and took...took women activists by surprise. Because there had been a kind of belief that the overarching commonality of experience was what held us together as a women’s movement. But when we were faced with communalism, then of course there was something to be learned from there. And I think it forced us to realize, in many ways to question our own assumptions. For example, in the early days, people would say, “Well, this is all false consciousness, the fact that women are being mobilized and brought out into the public space, because they are not questioning patriarchy.” But, and it’s true enough that they’re not questioning patriarchy and that is the strength of the right wing movements, which actually tend to mobilize women in large numbers. But I think also the issue for us was a kind of self-questioning: what had been wrong with our strategies, or what we were talking about, which made the whole question of feminism if you like, or emancipation, so frightening for women. And it is frightening. Because if you follow the logic through to its logical conclusion, you’re talking about questioning your most intimate relationships and you’re looking at power in the relationships with people that you love. So it would have to be a very strong, very brave, very independent, very supported woman who could do that and survive. It’s a much easier thing to then take the part that, say, the right wing offers you, where it offers you access to the public world, it offers you something which is a genuine kind of empowerment and political involvement. I don’t think it’s false, really. But it doesn’t...it doesn’t tell you to question patriarchy. You know, so I think the women’s movement, when it was faced with this reality had to rethink a lot of its assumptions.

Also, for example, women’s groups have always said women should have agency...they should have control. Suddenly here they were out in the streets killing other people, being agents, and, you know, then you sit back and say, but we didn’t mean that kind of agency. So in a sense it was...it’s a...it’s an educational process from which I think women’s groups are learning. I also think agency in war and conflict is a tremendous...now it’s a reality in, say, in the northeast, in Kashmir, in all the communal rights where women are there in great numbers, and you have to acknowledge that this does give them some kind of space for a kind of empowerment, and you have to then look at it to question what you did that was...that was wrong. You can’t just dismiss it as a sort of false consciousness. So I don’t know. I mean, I don’t have any answers to it.

Jayati: Right, right...

²⁸ Urvashi Butalia, ‘The Little Magazine,’ <http://www.littlemag.com/2000/urvashi.htm>.

Urvashi: But I just think that this is...this is a challenge and an issue that we need to think quite a lot about. The only consolation is that the right wing is as frightened of us as we are worried about them. You know: two feminists working on Sati, and they think, my God, you know, we've got to be careful of these women, so [laughter].

Jayati: I'm actually going to try and jump now. You know, you've talked about sexuality a little bit, and also about the reflexivity of the Indian's women's movement, which, were some of my questions, but I'd like you to sort of extend this reflexivity to your own trajectory now a bit more and go to the issue of Kali and the history of Kali and how you got involved in it. You've talked a little bit in your writings again about the sort of...the effect of, you know, say, for example, on the occasion of Jagori's²⁹ anniversary, which was recently, and sort of a looking back and taking stock 20 years later; in a sense that's also the same moment for Kali. So I'm very curious to sort of go back to that moment of founding it -- how Kali came out of the women's movement, what role did Kali play in the women's movement once it was founded. What was that synergy there that created the space and also that enabled it...

Urvashi: Yeah.

Jayati: ...to come into being.

Urvashi: Well, Kali was founded in '84. It was a sort of dream that had been with me for several years before that. And the reason for founding Kali was...I mean, it grew directly out of the women's movement.

Jayati: Now this is Kali for Women?

Urvashi: Kali for Women ...It's Kali for women.

Jayati: Okay. Kali...

Urvashi: It was actually originally named Kali, but when my ex-colleague Ritu and I teamed up, which was subsequent to its founding, if you like, or...or the idea, Ritu was very worried about the negative connotations of the name Kali. So, she asked if we could change it, and I was quite adamant about the name, which I had got very attached to. So we decided...well, she offered that we call it Kali for Women, which would make it seem less strident than just Kali. And what's more, by that time we had a logo. You know, those eyes. And Kali for Women sat very nicely on the eyes. So we thought, okay, that's [laughs]...

Jayati: More symmetrical.

Urvashi: ...you know. So...But...but the idea behind setting up Kali was something that grew directly out of the women's movement. I had been working in publishing at the time. I was

²⁹ Jagori was started in 1984 as a women's documentation, training and communication center in Delhi. Organically linked to the women's movement, it is committed to the creation of a just society and a space where feminist theory meets practice. See <<http://www.jagori.org>>.

working with the Oxford University Press. And I'd been feeling quite strongly that the women's movement was raising a lot of issues, and was involved in so many issues. But none of these saw any reflection in the published literature, except in a few sporadic publications that women's groups themselves brought out, which didn't enter the mainstream. So in a sense, seeing, you know, we were involved in the anti-dowry movement, but we knew so little about what it was, why it hap—was happening, where this new phenomenon was coming from and so on. So I felt that there was a real need for this kind of research and publications. And my bosses at the time in the Oxford University Press could not have been more uninterested in women's stuff. They thought it was just not serious enough. Then I thought that whatever...I looked around me and I felt that whatever we did have by way of women's literature or women's writing was largely produced by western scholars who came to India, had three or four months, produced a definitive book about us, which we had to then buy back at a very expensive price. So I thought it was time to start creating a body of knowledge, to start opening up the space for women. And also to start reversing this flow of information. And that was really was led to the setting up of Kali. I gave up my job. Well, I didn't give up the job, but I sort of gave up a whole lot of things, and decided to go into it along with Ritu. I think we were completely foolhardy. We were young. But I'm so glad we did it.

Jayati: Um-hum. As are we all. Um, you know, Kali had a really interesting mix from the beginning I think... of theory...you talked about literature, more practical, political tracts. So Kali was clearly in a very synergetic, you know, close, intimate relationship with women's groups. How did that affect the kinds of things you chose to publish? And also, sort of relatedly, would you call it...you know, you have Kali for Women in there. Would you say it was a women's press? Would you say it was a feminist press? How did you see the difference at the time?

Urvashi: Hm. Hm.

Jayati: Did you claim your...the label as ...you know, as a feminist press?

Urvashi: Yes. I think we...we always claimed the label as a feminist press. We had no...no issue with that at all. I've always felt that really labels are what you make of them. And I find the label of feminism both empowering and challenging. And on this, Ritu and I had total agreement. So we called ourselves a feminist press. But, yes, we use the word women's press interchangeably with that. As to your other question of where that placed us in terms of the women's movement and whether we saw ourselves as reflected or the movement reflected in us, yes. Well, we took a decision very early on in Kali that we would...that we owed our birth and existence to the women's movement, and we would always be both loyal and answerable to it. We would always see ourselves as part of it. But we also took a decision that we were going to operate in the commercial world, in a business world, and we were going to survive. That we were not going to allow ourselves to be wiped out or marginalized in the way that so many groups which do not have that kind of clout.... So we decided that we would publish books of the highest editorial standards, to international standards, that we would have them enter the national and the world markets on par with any other books. And I think we managed to stick to that, which is why so many of our books actually became like, you know, basic texts which were used in different things.

Jayati: In fact, one of your first ones...

Urvashi: One of our first ones...

Jayati: *Recasting Women*³⁰.

Urvashi: ...*Recasting Women*, yes.

Jayati: It's a classic.

Urvashi: It became...yeah. And it's still in print...

Jayati: Yes.

Urvashi:...today. It was published in I think -- I can't remember -- '93 or something, 20 years later. Or ten years later it's still in print. '89, I'm sorry. It was published in '89. '93 was another book.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Urvashi: So in that sense we took that decision. Now that in...you know, at some points, it also alienated us a little bit. ...Because the women's movement in India saw us very much as its...they owned us, you know...

Jayati: Yeah, it is....

Urvashi:...it's wing. And so often we would get offers of publications, which we could not do if we were to set certain standards. And we would have to refuse them or we would have to work with the women, and they didn't like this. So, although Kali was scrabbling for every penny and every paisa I had earned, in some ways we often acquired the reputation of being rich publishers and behaving like rich publishers, although we did our best not to. And in other ways, people accepted us. And I think that we were genuinely seen as the voice of the women's movement. And I have to say that if we had not had that loyal buyership or audience, we would not have made it. I mean, they...you know, booksellers used to tell us, "You're a weird publisher." People come into the bookshop saying, "When is the next Kali book coming out?" They don't ask for a book.

Jayati: Book.

Urvashi: But, "When is the next Kali book coming out?" And they just buy them up. And there are...

Jayati: That's right. Yeah.

³⁰ Sangari, Kumkum, and Sudesh Vaid, eds. *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*. New Brunswick, NJ; New Delhi: Rutgers University Press; Kali for Women, 1989.

Urvashi:...you know, there are people today who have all our publications as there are good file copies for us. So in that sense I think we did play a certain role, and I'm always grateful to women's groups for having sustained us.

Jayati: Um-hum. As somebody who's spent many dollars there [laughs], [in] the office, I know the feeling of even looking for dust-covered books amongst your old stock. But it is true that I was also able to find these tracts, what seemed like pamphlets, in the early days that perhaps in today's sort of commercial market might not get published. I remember some skinny little thing by Kamala³¹...

Urvashi: Yes. Yeah.

Jayati: ...so you were doing things a little differently then. Yeah.

Urvashi: We were doing things. I mean, we were...what we were doing was, we were doing books that earned us money.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Urvashi: And from that money we were doing books at cost or less than cost, which fed into the activism of the women's movement. But there were...we always retained this whole issue of quality and...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Urvashi: One of the books, you know, that we did, we were most excited about, was a book that came to us by accident—a group of village women in Rajasthan, I put together a book called *Shareer ki Jaankari -- Knowing Your Body*. And they made two books by hand, and then they brought them to us and said, "You know, we think we need them and would you like to publish them for us?" And they were stunning books. They were...you know, they had done this thing of...there was a woman who's...you see how her body changes from girlhood to adolescence to old age and so on and so forth, and initially they had drawn a naked woman. And then they tested the book in the village, and the villagers said to them, "You know, this is nonsense, you never see a naked woman in a village. How can you draw this? This is not real." So they went back and they thought about it, and then they drew pictures of this woman fully covered, you know, head to toe -- *lehenga*³², *choli*³³, *dupatta*³⁴, everything. And then she had a little flap and you lifted it up and you saw (interviewer laughing) how she was made. Little doors and you open them, and her breasts, all this and...

Jayati: That's a production nightmare.

³¹ Kamala Bhasin is a Delhi-based feminist activist. She wrote a couple of pamphlets published by Kali such as *Feminism in South Asia* (co-authored with Nighat Said Khan), in 1986 and *What is Patriarchy?* in 1993.

³² A full skirt often worn with a choli and dupatta.

³³ A blouse that matches the lehenga.

³⁴ A long scarf generally worn draped around the neck or across the body.

Urvashi: Stunning it was. And it was a production nightmare, but we found a group of women binders....who bound it for us with these little slips and things, you know, putting them together in the right order and everything. Became such a wonderful exercise for us. We printed initially two thousand copies. Before they finished printing, the village women had sold them.

Jayati: Oh, my God.

Urvashi: They had sold them out at, you know, less than cost. And up till now we have done, I would say, 50,000 copies of that book in Hindi or more.

Jayati: And have you translated it into other languages?

Urvashi: We haven't but everybody else has.

Jayati: Really.

Urvashi: There's a Gujarati translation, Tamil translation, Marathi translation.

Jayati: That's wonderful.

Urvashi: I don't know how many translations exist. It's called *Apnee Kitab*, you know, *My Book*. And you can go into a work shop in Rajasthan or Maharashtra or somewhere, you'll see all women are using it. They just...And we've never sold a single copy through a bookshop. But we've sold it in this...on this alternative network. So we did that kind of thing. Now, no mainstream publisher would do that. But that was our commitment to the women's movement.

Jayati: Um-hum. That's a fascinating story. Now what about your commitment in the sense you've already alluded to it, but could you tell me about how you see Kali's role in shaping and actually formulating Women's Studies? I mean, this is also women...the first few Women's Studies programs, I think SNDT University³⁵, right, was probably the first? It was also at the same time as Kali about early '80s, something like that.

Urvashi: Yes, hm.

Jayati: So how do you...What sort of role do you see Kali having played in that, in really the formulation of Women's Studies as a body of knowledge?

Urvashi: Well, you know, Women's Studies comes into India roughly at the same time, as you've said. India was one of the first countries to look at the whole question of Women's Studies as a result of some discussions they had had with UNESCO, and they had a number of meetings in the mid-70s I think, where the whole issue got raised. And then, these Women Studies centers were gradually set up. In the initial stages, they were mainly research centers. They didn't teach. Even now, very few of them teach. But they do have courses which are now attached to other courses. A lot of this material that we publish provides...I mean, is used in these courses *now*, because it's all there and it forms a part of that whole canon which they are they creating for the use of Women's Studies. But also a lot of the scholars that we have published

³⁵ A women's university in Mumbai (Bombay).

have grown out of the Women's Studies networks that have been set up in different universities. So they've come to us with their books. We have commissioned them to write. So there's been quite a close relationship. And one of the early books we published was a book called *Women's Studies, Women's Lives*,³⁶ which really looked at how Women's Studies and women's involvement in Women's Studies had changed their lives. And it was made up of histories of women who have been involved in Women's Studies. So that has been quite, I would say, quite a close and fruitful relationship. We've been involved in all the Women's Studies conferences that take place. Every two years, you have an Indian Association of Women's Studies Conference. We have a stall there, we go there, we organize panels there and so on. All of that happens.

Jayati: You talked about wanting to reverse the flow of knowledge and change the circuits at least.

Urvashi: Um-hum.

Jayati: So what was the reception of Kali abroad? And how do you feel that you navigated that? Or was that not part of your initial concern, because you were more concerned with an Indian audience?

Urvashi: No, it was part of our concern. Of course our primary audience is Indian or...But it was part of our concern. And we did have...It was, you know, ups and downs really. In some places we were received very well. In others, there was an assumption among Western publishers about the inferiority of what we were doing in some ways. And it took a long...it was a long struggle to prove otherwise. For example, you know, *Recasting Women*, when we were selling it to...we were trying to find a foreign publisher for it, the first publisher who looked at it was Routledge, and who approved of it very much, and then came back after five months saying, "Oh, it's very uneven and we don't want it." Now they—they, you know, regret this decision because that book has become a classic. And then we were looking for other publishers. And the current publisher who took it, Rutgers University Press, very interestingly wanted to have India in the title.

Jayati: Hm.

Urvashi: *Recasting Women in India*. And we argued, saying, why?

Jayati: Um-hum. Um-hum.

Urvashi: If you had a book published in the West, you would not say *Recasting Women in America*. So why do you want to locate it in India? And the authors were adamant about it.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Urvashi: And finally with ill grace they agreed to not having India in it. Now I don't think they regret it. But it's that kind of assumption. We had it with somebody else who took a book from

³⁶ *Women's Studies, Women's Lives theory and Practice in South and Southeast Asia*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1994.

us. I mean, recently I was negotiating with a University Press about a book, and they said to us, “We’ll give you the book, but if any single copy of that book enters the American market, we will fine you a thousand dollars.” And I thought this was the most imperialist thing anyone could say to me, because how dare you say that! You know, Americans quote this -- what is it? -- the Fourth Amendment all the time for their...or First Amendment, I don’t know which one it is. And their books flood our markets when the markets are closed. But the same thing does not work in reverse. And to have the temerity to say that I will fine you a thousand dollars. Now we come across this kind of thing all the time.

Jayati: Hm.

Urvashi: And you have to deal with it. But that’s not to say that we don’t come across a whole lot of, you know, sympathy and empathy and support. We’ve had amazing support from scholars outside from university presses and others outside. And now I think things have changed.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Urvashi: Now it’s become very important for say, South Asian is working in the [United]States, elsewhere to be published in South Asia. So now they seek us out as a desirable option. You know, earlier we had to convince them of our credentials. So in that sense I think we’ve had some success in doing what we wanted to do.

Jayati: Um-hum. Well, your success is also measured by the fact that all, quote-unquote, “mainstream” presses in India now, OUP, you know, any number of them, have a substantial offering in Gender Studies, which wasn’t...

Urvashi: That’s true.

Jayati: ...the case before. So in some ways you have mainstreamed gender into the publishing world in India. But...And the picture has changed quite a bit. So how do you see yourselves being different from the kinds of work that’s being published on gender by the mainstream presses, or...yeah, the presses that publish in India? And also then, if we could talk a little bit about Zubaan, because this is the field that Zubaan is entering into, and how do you see Zubaan as being different? What sort of issues do you think it’ll take up? And how do you sort of plan for that?

Urvashi: Yeah. You know when Kali split last year into two new imprints, the question really facing us was, have we come to the end of our lives? That is, have we been the architects of our own demise in many ways, by our very success? The fact that now mainstream presses publish books, gender-related books, books by women scholars, does that mean there’s no space for us? And ought we now to gracefully retire? And I think that there is some truth in that, that when...what is the alternative, struggling to be the mainstream finally becomes the mainstream, is there a space for the alternative or not? What we have tried to do which I think we’re also doing in Zubaan is to actually keep on exploring that space and creating or excavating new areas in it. Because I do believe that there is a finite point in time where, say, a feminist, self-

proclaimedly critical feminist publisher will have to merge with the mainstream or will have to say, “Okay, I’ve done my bit, now it’s time to opt out.”

Jayati: Um-hum. Um-hum.

Urvashi: I don’t think that time is now, yet. I think that what we are doing, hopefully, which is different...we are doing similar things also... we will continue to do the academic books and...and struggle, you know, against the competition offered by the mainstream presses, but, while for the mainstream presses this may be a passing phase, for us, this is a lifetime commitment. And we will keep on exploring new areas. So, for example, in Zubaan, what we have done is, we’ve broadbased our work much more. My feeling is that the women’s movement has now changed so much worldwide that we need to look at more popular aspects of publishing. We need to look at books that are not overtly necessarily “feminist” within quotes, but have a gender perspective, which may run through the entire book, and which may not be something which is an overtly political stance. We need to address the whole issue of younger people, so we are looking at books for younger people. I think we need to have some books for fun, you know. Just pleasure, fun. We’re doing a book of feminist posters, we’re doing a book of cartoons. Let’s...

Jayati: That’s wonderful.

Urvashi:...you know, let’s enjoy ourselves a bit also. I mean, it’s serious business, feminism, but it’s also fun. It’s great. So, in that sense I think we need, you know, to be...We’re looking at the whole issue of languages, publishing in Indian languages...

Jayati: Um-hum. Um-hum.

Urvashi: ...rather than just in English. And all of these are new areas which offer very, very rich scenes, and which I don’t think will come to an end that quickly.

Jayati: That’s good. I was going to ask you about the language. And the other thing I wanted to ask you, is you’ve referred sometimes to feminist publish—feminist publishing—as a developmental activity,³⁷ what did you mean by that? What do you mean by that?

Urvashi: I mean by that that in some ways you’re working to develop a body of knowledge about and by women. But in some ways, you’re also working to develop the self confidence among women to actually write. You know, women are so scared of writing, so scared of the...the conditioning that has put their thoughts and their concerns into some kind of inferior bracket that often we find we have to really build up women’s self confidence to actually be able to write. And in that sense it is a development activity, because you are working at developing skills, you’re working at developing self confidence. You’re working...it’s also a development activity, because within the straightforward development frame, it is building up a whole lot of literature there. But also it’s...it’s...you know, say, for example, policymakers in India now, if they need

³⁷ Urvashi makes this point in: “Foregrounding Women’s Voices: An Interview with Urvashi Butalia,” by By Laxmi Murthy. <http://www.comminit.com/strategicthinking/st2004/thinking-37.html>.

information about women, where will they turn? They will turn to a lot of the books that have been published by Kali.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Urvashi: Which help them to then work the development agenda of the country further.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Urvashi: So...

Jayati: So you mean it, also, in quite a literal sense.

Urvashi: Yes, yes. I mean it in the literal sense, but I mean it in a much broader sense also.

Jayati: Sure, sure. I'd like to switch gears now and sort of talk to you about your writing. We don't have much time but, you know, your writing is really very diverse and spans several different areas. And before I go into talking about specific texts, I'd love to talk about the *Question of Silence*. I wanted to ask you questions about and have you reflect about the relevance of feminism to your work in writing. And it's quite clear how it's affected the work that you've done in Kali. And I want to start off with a really simple question. How do you understand the term feminism?

Urvashi: You know, it's not a simple question at all. It's a very difficult question. But how I understand the term feminism -- it's...it's what I live, it's what I breathe, it's what I believe in, it's what gives my life meaning. I think without it, I would not be...I don't...I mean, I would...I would count myself a very worthless human being without feminism. But that doesn't still explain to you what it means. In very, very simple terms, if you ask me the question as a simple question, let me respond to you with a simple answer: it is to me the belief that every human being has the right to live with dignity and humanity. And that just by virtue of being a different gender or a different class or a different caste, you are not ruled out of that. Nobody has the right to deny you that. And really at a very simple level, that's what it means. Lots of people say, "But that's humanism." Well, I'm...could be, but humanism has always left women out. So I don't really think I would own humanism. But I would own feminism.

Jayati: But it's interesting, because in a sense what you're doing is you're describing feminism as an intrinsically linked to the politics of...of class, the politics of caste, the politics of race, the politics of imperialism and so on. So I guess I can skip the question of whether you would call yourself a feminist [laughs].

Urvashi: There's no question about it. I wouldn't call myself anything else.

Jayati: Right. That's clear. But how do you see the relationships between your scholarship, your writing, your activism, and your publishing work? It's amazing to me, as I go over your biography, that you actually have made time for all of these things throughout—writing, teaching, as well. I mean, your pedagogy is also a very strong, continuous thread throughout your life. Is that also part of your feminist commitment, to keep all of those...

Urvashi: Yeah.

Jayati:...the writing, and also writing in such different fora, that really you could be spoken of as a public intellectual?

Urvashi: Hmm, I don't know about that. Well, you know, the thing is that, um...I count myself very, very lucky. You know, I think I am an extraordinarily privileged person. To be able to do something that very few people can do, and very few women particularly, have the possibility of doing. Which is to be able to combine what you politically believe in and what you would live and die for, with a professional interest and with a kind of personal commitment, if you like. So this combination of the personal, the political, and the professional, you know, so that there is...my life is a kind of seamless thing from which the work flows into the personal commitment, into my family life. I'm a very strong family person, even though I'm a single woman, and people, you know, often say, "Oh, as a single woman you don't have the kind of responsibilities that, say, a mother might have. And I just don't think...I think that that is...that comes from thinking about really nuclear families in a particular way. I mean, I...I live with my...or my mother lives with me. I look after her. And I have an extended family around. But all of those things actually feed into my feminism. And I think in that sense there is a way in which everything is connected -- So the writing is part of it, the living is part of it, the daily dealings with people I have to deal with are part of it, the political activity is part of it, and so on.

But in answer to your very specific...If you were to look at it in specific terms, let's say, my work on Partition, for example, deeply influenced by feminism. I don't think that I would have had the sensitivity to look at marginalized communities, I wouldn't have been led to the experiences of women had I not been a feminist and had feminism not given me that...that...you know, the feeling to...to actually look beyond what you see on the surface. I don't think I would have actually even begun to understand the way Dalits experience this event. I would certainly not have addressed issues of sexuality in the way that I have done in my work. So in that sense, I think feminism, feminist history, feminist historiography, opened up those doors for me, which otherwise would never have been there. And since this is really the Partition work is the major work that I've done in my life, that is a very specific answer to your to your question about how feminism has influenced things.

Jayati: So maybe you've already answered my next question, which was, what the impetus...?

Urvashi: I told you I have a bad habit of jumping ahead [laughter]

Jayati: That's okay. It's all very inter-connected. What was the impetus for writing the book *The Other Side of Silence*? And I'm going to take the liberty of quoting you again. It wasn't an easy book to write. And, as you've said, it entails really coming to terms with one's own past and one's own country's past. I quote: "Coming to terms with the violent past, to excavate memory, to confront complicity, to listen to stories of grief and pain. Working on this book was not an easy thing for me, and all the time I was haunted by the

question of how useful an exercise such as this would be.”³⁸ So why did you write the book? And how did you come to write the book?

Urvashi: Well, I came to write the book by accident really, as often these things happen. I worked on a film on Partition, and I heard a lot of stories and the filmmaker said to me, “Why don’t you take this further?” But I probably would not have done it had 1984 not happened in Delhi when Mrs. Gandhi was assassinated, and there were all these...violence against the Sikhs and about 3,000 Sikhs were killed in Delhi. And I group of us citizens under the banner of a group called Nagrik Ekta Manch³⁹ joined together to work with the victims of the violence. And my job in the place that I was working was really to write down people’s accounts of what happened so that they could file compensation claims, and I began to hear a lot of stories about Partition. And that alerted me to the fact that I had heard these stories all my life, but had never really paid any attention to them. I’d heard them in my own family from my mother, whose brother stayed behind in Pakistan and became a Muslim, and there was a deep sense of betrayal and so on. So that was when I started to explore this. And I started to explore my own family history. But once I had actually got deep into that history, it just led me to all the other things. And in a sense it, you know, it directs you. You just...it’s a stupidity to say you become an instrument, and I’m not going to say that, because it’s a silly romantic thing to say. But in a sense it was just that one history led me to another, to another, to another, and after a while, although initially I didn’t have a book in my head, after a while a felt a tremendous sense of responsibility, that I have to find a way of...of talking about this, and I have to find a responsible way of talking about this. But it was also very, very painful. You know, you just...there were days when you listen to stories of people who have lived through such violence, such grief, such pain, and you come out of it completely over-burdened thinking, why am I doing this? And I used to think...No ... what is all this about? You know, why am I doing this? But I must say that I’m very grateful to have found the courage to actually follow it through. Because it’s been a...an extremely rewarding and learning experience doing it. And of course, the feminism really was what sustained me through it.

Jayati: So, was feminism also what led you to decide to use oral history as a methodology to uncover voices, as you say, that haven’t been heard?

Urvashi: Yes. Very much. That was definitely something I would not have done if I...if I hadn’t been, you know, so schooled in feminism to actually start talking to people. And particularly to start talking to women and to try and listen to what they said and what they did not say.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Urvashi: And that’s why silence becomes such a big thing in...in this work that I am doing. Because really it’s feminism that alerts you, that trains you to listen to silence. And not only to

³⁸ From Urvashi Butalia’s acceptance speech at the 8th annual Nikkei Asia Prizes Award Ceremony in 2003. See http://www.nni.nikkei.co.jp/FR/NIKKEI/inasia/prizes/2003/2003butalia_speech.html for more detail.

³⁹ Nagrik Ekta Manch = regional/city unity organization/union. Nagrik Ekta Manch was a people’s initiative and was born spontaneously out of the enormous outpouring of outrage at the genocidal killings and a desire to provide some form of relief. NEM became the hub of one of the most well organized, non-governmental relief and rehabilitation efforts in recent times.

listen to silence but to take it with all the...the nuance and the body language and the interactiveness that comes with it, and to always be aware that when you are talking to women, it's very, very difficult to reach beyond that silence unless they trust you completely. So I think, yes, there definitely I would say that it was the feminist background that led me to that.

Jayati: You have very evocative descriptions of encountering that silence and knowing that there is something beyond there. You talk, for example, about the honor killings and going with one of your subjects to Pakistan and...and sort of wondering at the time, seeing their interaction after all those years, whether they knew. They must have known, you're asking yourself; you know, so they must have known about this. But at this...the silent presence. And do you...do you feel that...do you feel that oral history in some ways enabled you to write that history in a way that you might not otherwise have been able to do?

Urvashi: Yes. I think definitely it did enable me to write that history in what I hope is an accessible and fairly direct way. And it also...Because, you know, otherwise I could have been sort of hiding in dusty archives and looking up documents and just producing a very dry, very lacking in humanity, history. Which I think that oral history allows you to...to do something different. And also I think that one of the things that I became very aware of and...during this interaction was that it wasn't only...the history I was writing was not only about the people that I was interviewing. It was very much about my own interaction with them. That if I was to be honest, then I had to represent that history as a history that was being shaped as much by my questioning and my telling as it was by their responses and their telling. And I think again, that's something that as a feminist you're very aware of, especially as a, say, a middle class feminist. You go into some area to talk to somebody who is in a much worse situation than you are. And you never quite...You know, the situation is never quite one of equality. It is always power is implicit in that situation, and you have to learn how to negotiate it and how to sort of get round it, and how not to push that person back into a situation of powerlessness, which is so easy also with oral history. You know, I mean, I could manipulate those interviews whichever way I wanted to. So it taught me responsibility...

Jayati: Sure.

Urvashi:...also, in that it taught me morality, ethics, all of those things.

Jayati: Um-hum. Now this Partition work has also let you into your more recent project on Mona, the Eunuch. Could you explain this? It doesn't seem like an overt connection there. But it was very much the Partition work that led you to that story.

Urvashi: Well, I think there is a direct kind of link, you know, in some ways, and the questions of identity and sexuality preoccupied me a lot in the Partition work, especially looking at women and how their sexuality was defined by the State and so on. And I actually went to see Mona, the Eunuch who is 67...66, 67 years old and lives in Delhi in a graveyard. I went to see her because I was looking for how communities on the margins of society experience the violence of Partition. And I had heard that the eunuchs had some very specific experiences. And I was very curious about how people for whom the borders of identity lie at gender and not at religion would have had to make choices during this time when religion was the overarching identity that was being

thrust upon people. So I went to see her for that. And then of course it got involved in the whole discussion when she asked me to write her life and...And that was really something very...You know, it went beyond the Partition work, looking squarely at the whole issue of sexuality and...And also interestingly expanding the discussion of sexuality as something not defined only by sex. Because for Mona it is...sex is the least important part of her sexuality.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Urvashi: And for many people who are very closely involved in the discussion of sexuality, sex is such a central part of it, you know. Often it's the sex and the...that wipes out the sexuality.

Jayati: You're not talking of...let's clarify this ambiguity about her sex in terms of her body. You're talking about...a physical sex.

Urvashi: the act of sex, of physical sex.

Jayati: Because she's a post-operative eunuch, right?

Urvashi: Yeah.

Jayati: So that she's...

Urvashi: Yeah. She's a eunuch-castrated-male who later had a sex change. So now she has a female body.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Urvashi: But, you know, a lot of eunuchs who do go through sex changes become sex workers and do offer their bodies up for sex. But Mona has made that choice and she's not interested in that. She's not interested in sex per se. But she has a lot of insights to offer on sexuality, and on...you know, for young men transiting from the male identity to becoming either gay or...or transvestites, or inhabiting the female identity. Mona is a sort of advisor to all of them.

Jayati: So is that the next book?

Urvashi: That will hopefully be the next book, if and when I get down to writing it. When I take time off from my publishing [laughs] to write this.

Jayati: Well, I hope you get the time. Thank you so much, really, for sharing this very wonderful career with us. And I just wanted to ask you, in closing, what accomplishments or what achievements, or what part of your history in which you've done, if you look back on the last 20 years, let's say, since we've been using 20 years as a reflexive moment through this interview, are you most proud of, when you think back about the choices that you've made? And the many honors that have been bestowed upon you.

Urvashi: I don't know. I don't know if I'd say what I'm most proud of. I think I just...I said this to you earlier. I think I'm just...you know, I'm a...I'm a happy, contented woman. I think that I've been able to do something that I really wanted with my life. And I can never stop counting myself lucky and touching wood and saying that not many people have this privilege and I don't know what I've done to have it. But that's...that's...

Jayati: It's not really kismet⁴⁰, is it?

Urvashi: No, it's not really kismet. But, you know, they...there are things that happen, you take certain decisions at the right time, or at the appropriate time, and they lead to certain things. I mean, suppose I had decided to start Kali ten years later. It would have been too late.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Urvashi: But I didn't know at the time that that was the right time. It was just what I wanted to do. Turned out to be a wonderful moment for doing something like that. Which led to a whole lot of other things.

Jayati: But that contentment and that...those choices at the right time, would you say that they have come from following your political will, or...or your political commitments?

Urvashi: I would say yes. But I would say they've also come from being extraordinarily privileged -- I have used this word before -- in having the support of friends and family in anything that I wanted to do. I mean, had my family not been such a supportive family, had my parents insisted I get married, you know, I might have been some...some...doing something very different today. They never did. My mother often says to me that, you know, there was a time she used to worry that I hadn't married and what would happen to me in my old age. Now she says she worries that in case I do marry at this late age, what'll happen to her in her old age. [Interviewer laughs] And she's already 83. So there's no danger of my marrying or her suffering, you know.

Jayati: It's funny that you say this. Because I...one of the questions that I skipped, but I really wanted to come to was, how it is...you know, to ask you how it is to live as a single woman in India, which is very, very difficult. And for some of us, some of the choices we've made to not go back often hinge around the difficulty of life in its everyday-ness...

Urvashi: Um-hum.

Jayati: ...quite aside from the way in which you've been so prominent in the professional field.

Urvashi: Well, I think, you know, once you reach middle age, everything's okay. Indians don't really care about a middle-aged single woman who doesn't seem overtly frustrated. Because in the early days it used to be this business, "Oh, God, she's frustrated, she's a spinster." I don't think I ever really faced that, but that's the kind of, you know, thing that you grow up with,

⁴⁰Destiny

people are going to thrust this at you. But I guess if they see that you are generally, you know, okay and satisfied with your life and not shouting at people all the time, and then you've reached middle age and you're okay, then it's fine.

Jayati: But it never stopped you from doing anything either.

Urvashi: No, no.

Jayati: So it's not just middle age.

Urvashi:[laughs] No, it's not middle age. No, but I think really it's...you can...it's very tough to be a single woman in Delhi.

Jayati: Yes.

Urvashi: And or...in India.

Jayati: Still. You think still?

Urvashi: Yeah, I think it's still very tough. I mean, I think also, you know, I laugh it off, but really even in my profession, it has been difficult. I've had a lot of respect, I've had a lot of, I don't know, easy interaction with my male colleagues, but I've had my share of their assumption that because I'm single, I'm available. And you have to, you know, develop a way of dealing with printers, with your male colleagues, and all of them that...that establishes the lines, that this is a...this is a border that you do not cross.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Urvashi: And it's not easy, but, you know, eventually you do it. And of course I don't think that I would have been able to do it if I hadn't really had my family backing me. My parents, my brothers, my sister. And, you know, all my friends. I really don't think I would have been able to do it. So...I enjoy being single. I'm glad you said 'single' and not 'unmarried'.

Jayati: Oh, no, I have a

Urvashi: Because it's a positive state rather than a negative state.

Jayati: Yes. Is there anything else that you want to add that we haven't talked about that you would like to say, today?

Urvashi: Eh, I think we've talked about a whole lot of different things. I don't really know what to add. You know, the...there was just...the one thing that I thought of which you might find interesting, that I started my publishing life purely by accident and as a what's called a paster-upper, which is an unglorified person who sits and pastes names. You know, so that we were adapting a whole lot of English books for Indian schools. So what we had was there was an artist there, who was coloring all the blond hair black and the blue eyes black, and I was pasting Ram

and Sita⁴¹ on top of John and Mary. [interviewer laughs] So from very humble beginnings you can move on to do some quite interesting things.

Jayati: Well, and also to publishing works with names of Ram and Sita or, you know, whatever, already in them, rather than Harry and Susan, right?

Urvashi: Yeah [laughs].

Jayati: To look for the work that already had that...

Urvashi: To look for the...

Jayati: ...in it's writing.

Urvashi: That's right.

Jayati: In its main writing.

Urvashi: Yeah.

Jayati: Well, wonderful. That's a really great way to end. Thank you so much, Urvashi...

Urvashi: Thank you Jayati.

Jayati: ...for being with us today.

Urvashi: Thanks.

⁴¹ Hindu gods, and common first names among Hindus in India