

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

**SITE: INDIA**

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

**Location: Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh, India**

**Date: 29-30 November, 2005**

**Language of Interview: English**



**SPARROW**

**Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women**

**B-32, Jeet Nagar,**

**J.P. Road, Versova,**

**Mumbai-400061**

**Tel: 2824 5958, 2826 8575 & 2632 8143**

**E-mail: [sparrow@bom3.vsnl.net.in](mailto:sparrow@bom3.vsnl.net.in)**

**Website: [www.sparrowonline.org](http://www.sparrowonline.org)**

## Acknowledgments

*Global Feminisms: Comparative Case Studies of Women's Activism and Scholarship* was housed at the Institute for Research on Women and Gender at the University of Michigan (UM) in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The project was co-directed by Abigail Stewart, Jayati Lal and Kristin McGuire.

The China site was housed at the China Women's University in Beijing, China and directed by Wang Jinling and Zhang Jian, in collaboration with UM faculty member Wang Zheng.

The India site was housed at the Sound and Picture Archives for Research on Women (SPARROW) in Mumbai, India and directed by C.S. Lakshmi, in collaboration with UM faculty members Jayati Lal and Abigail Stewart.

The Poland site was housed at Fundacja Kobiet eFKa (Women's Foundation eFKa) in Krakow, Poland and directed by Slawka Walczewska, in collaboration with UM faculty member Magdalena Zaborowska.

The U.S. site was housed at the Institute for Research on Women and Gender at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Michigan and directed by UM faculty member Elizabeth Cole.

Graduate student interns on the project included Nicola Curtin, Kim Dorazio, Jana Haritatos, Helen Ho, Julianna Lee, Sumiao Li, Zakiya Luna, Leslie Marsh, Sridevi Nair, Justyna Pas, Rosa Peralta, Desdamona Rios and Ying Zhang.

Undergraduate student interns on the project included Alexandra Gross, Julia MacMillan, Libby Pozolo, Shana Schoem and Megan Williamson.

Translations into English, Polish and Chinese were provided by Kim Dorazio, Cheng Jizhong, Kasia Kietlinska, Justyna Pas, Alena Zemanek and Ying Zhang.

Technical assistance was provided by R. Thomas Bray, Dustin Edwards and Keith Rainwater.

Graphic design was provided by Elisabeth Paymal.

The project was initially supported by a University of Michigan Rackham Interdisciplinary Collaboration Research Grant. Additional support was provided by the College of Literature, Science and the Arts, International Institute, Institute for Research on Women and Gender, Women's Studies, Humanities Institute, the Center for South Asian Studies, the Herman Family Fund, the Center for African and Afro-American Studies and the Office of the Provost at the University of Michigan.

For more information, visit our website at <http://www.umich.edu/~gblbfem/>

© Regents of the University of Michigan, 2006

**Jarjum Ete** is currently the Chairperson of the Arunachal Pradesh<sup>1</sup> State Commission on Women. She belongs to the Galo tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. The tribe practices child marriage, polygamy and is basically a patriarchal tribe where women are not equal nor do they have inheritance and other rights.

Jarjum Ete got married when she was just seventeen and completed her studies after marriage. Her husband Tomi Ete is at present a chief engineer with the government. In 1985 she joined the Arunachal Pradesh Women's Welfare Society and became an active volunteer and later rose to be its spokesperson. The APWWS has taken up many issues like women's participation in panchayats<sup>2</sup>, customary laws<sup>3</sup>, need for a state women's commission and anti-liquor laws. Jarjum herself has very strong views on legalisation of prostitution.

She was one of the participants to the Beijing Conference<sup>4</sup> and has also visited Pakistan and other countries.

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

---

<sup>1</sup> Arunachal Pradesh is a state of India in the Northeast of India. Itanagar is the capital of the state.

<sup>2</sup> Institutions of local self-government in India; district councils.

<sup>3</sup> Laws that are based in custom or usage that is ancient, well-established and has force; in India, customary laws, which, for example prohibit daughters' inheritance, take precedence over Constitutional law in tribal areas.

<sup>4</sup> Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, China in 1995.

## Jarjum Ete Transcript

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

**Jarjum Ete:** Okay

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

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

**C S Lakshmi:** Darling of the father.

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

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

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

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

**Jarjum Ete:** I was born in this place called Along<sup>5</sup>. Actually my father comes from a village. Originally he was born in a place called Laggi but that village, I think, lots of children used to die and so my grandfather had moved out to another place called Tego. So, but we are all the siblings were born and brought up in Along which is the district headquarters of West Siang. Of

---

<sup>5</sup> A city in Manipur.

course, those days it was undivided Siang<sup>6</sup>. But now this is the district headquarters of West Siang. We call it Along on records but people call it Alop.

**C S Lakshmi: And what was your father?**

Jarjum Ete: Oh, my father was a political interpreter. In Assamese<sup>7</sup> they used to call them *dubhashi*. They still have these posts in the government. They were kind of, you know, communicators for the administration and the people. So people who could speak more than one language.

**C S Lakshmi: They are like translators?**

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

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

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

**C S Lakshmi: Okay**

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

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

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

---

<sup>6</sup> West and East Siang are districts in the state of Arunachal Pradesh.

<sup>7</sup> The language spoken in parts of Arunachal Pradesh and other northeast Indian states. The word Assamese is English.

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

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

**C S Lakshmi: Really?**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**C S Lakshmi: Ya.**

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

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

Jarjum Ete: I had my schooling at hometown. Started at a nursery school. It used to be called Nehru Memorial English School. And from there I was shifted to Ramakrishna Mission School run by of course R. K. Mission, Matha Mission. That's all in Along. And normally the Ramakrishna Missions they actually have only boys schools. But the one in our place they had co-education where of course girls had non-residential schooling. After I did my matriculation, I got married, and after marriage I did my pre-university and graduation from the Itanagar college, which actually used to be a night college affiliated with the Punjab University in the early 80's because of the Assam agitation<sup>8</sup> being on the peak those days. So the only college...is here. It was affiliated to Punjab University. And then after a gap of about seven years I joined the University just to have an experience of how a University feels like. So I did my Masters in English Literature.

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

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

---

<sup>8</sup> Protest against illegal migrants from Bangladesh.

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

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

Jarjum Ete: Actually Galos we have a very rich, you know, a...a dialect. But we really don't have our own script. Many of us use, prefer to use Roman script, and (pause) otherwise some people like, you know, in writing use Devnagari<sup>9</sup> also. But neither of the scripts actually help us to kind of really write our own dialect properly. But we have a group called "The Galo Welfare Society"; one wing of it is now working on evolving a script for the Galos.

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

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

**C S Lakshmi: Aa....**

(...)

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

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

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

(...)

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

---

<sup>9</sup> Devanāgarī is a script used to write several North Indian languages, including Sanskrit, Hindi, Marathi, Sindhi, Bihari, Bhili, Konkani, Bhojpuri, Nepali from Nepal and sometimes Kashmiri and Romani. It is written and read from left to right.



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

C S Lakshmi: Aa...ha

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

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

Jarjum Ete: Not exactly, not exactly

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

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

(...)

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

Jarjum Ete: I think there has been influences, of course, we have more than 25 major groups and as many as 100 plus minor tribes and sub-tribes. And each one of course have their own unique practices, rituals, even beliefwise, they have faith systems and the people who have been in touch with the Ahoms, or the people from the plains of Assam, they have a tendency to kind of practicing Vaishnavism<sup>10</sup> and in some cases Shaivism<sup>11</sup> also and there are two tribes in Eastern Arunachal the Khamtis and Singhos who practiced Hinayana Buddhism<sup>12</sup> akin to the one practiced in Thailand and Sri Lanka. And then we also have Mahayana Buddhists<sup>13</sup> in Western Arunachal among the Monpas and Sherdukpen. In between we have the group of people who call themselves the descendants of the first man, Abo Tani,<sup>14</sup> and this group also have their own practices within their own groups they have their own practices. But, ever since the missionaries have come in, both Christian and Hindu Missionaries, we have lots of proselytisation by the churches and also an effort of organising the, you know, indigenous groups to resist further

---

<sup>10</sup> One of the principal divisions of Hinduism. Its adherents worship Vishnu.

<sup>11</sup> a branch of Hinduism that worships Siva as the Supreme God.

<sup>12</sup> One of the oldest forms of Buddhism still in existence. It focuses on monasticism and the struggle to achieve a saintly life rather than on attaining complete enlightenment and Buddhhood; therefore, it is called the "Lesser Vehicle."

<sup>13</sup> One of the major branches of Buddhism.

<sup>14</sup> Primal ancestor of the Donyi-Polo religion indigenous to Arunachal Pradesh.

proselytisation. This is basically been organised by the frontal groups of the Sangh Parivar.<sup>15</sup> There are different banners, different organisations, so called social organisations of the Sangh Parivars. There are influences, of course.

**C S Lakshmi: And also resistances?**

Jarjum Ete: Ha, it's actually, if you had time you could have met some more people, but, what's also happening is actually there were efforts to Hinduise the tribal population in many groups. But unfortunately because of our food habits, our own unique cultures, you know, which is so different from the Hindu fold, you know, and especially among the educated people, people who are aware of the Varna system of Hindu groups, like, you know, they say even if you become Hindus we cannot be among the higher castes so at the most may be Shudras.<sup>16</sup> And who wants to be a Shudra whereas we are, like, you know, very proud people as ourselves. So that way Hinduisation couldn't take root, but again there are people who have been perhaps to some extent benefited by their proximity with the groups. We know a few cases at least.

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

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

**C S Lakshmi: Ya.**

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

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

Jarjum Ete: Of course

**C S Lakshmi: Like the Mithun sacrifice.<sup>17</sup>**

---

<sup>15</sup> The Sangh Parivar is a loose "family" (*parivar*) of organizations, which promote the ideology of Hindutva. Hindutva proponents believe in a Hindu nation or community that includes Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists. Sangh organisations are anti-Communist, anti-socialist, and pro-business; they are considered to be on the political "right" wing.

<sup>16</sup> The lowest of the four Hindu varnas, believed to have been born of Brahma's feet. A Shudra enjoyed no rights or privileges. He was not permitted to perform any sacrifices or homa, read or learn the Vedas or recite the mantras. A Shudra could marry only another Shudra. He was not allowed to enter temples and could only serve the upper three castes as a slave, barber, blacksmith or cobbler. Their status is only higher than harijans, or Dalits.

<sup>17</sup> New year festival, in which an animal-- either a pig or a mithun (ox, or "Indian bison")—is sacrificed as offering to the Supreme God, Tingkao Ragwang. This is preceded by a competitive catching of the animal; after the sacrifice of the pig, the spleen is examined to find out the omen for the future.

Jarjum Ete: Of course

**C S Lakshmi: Is one of the major things.**

Jarjum Ete: Ya

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

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

(...)

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

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

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

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

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

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

**C S Lakshmi: Yes.**

Jarjum Ete: Ya, she was I think junior to my mother in the school. She graduated from Shillong and then of course she became Rajyasabha M P from our state. And she even now is one of the

invitees of the Congress Working Committee and she had headed the Arunachal Pradesh Congress Committee also. So first generation educated woman.

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

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

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

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

**C S Lakshmi: Like land?**

Jarjum Ete: No, no land, no houses. But of course when it comes to government land influential families, their women, their daughters are having access to government land. In fact, so much so

that because there is no Land Ceiling Act in the state, people with, influential people with many wives, each of their wives is getting land, government land. And many may be poor men might not also be getting access to government land. And movable property...parents who have their own traditional riches, they do part with lots of jewellery and artifacts, you know, antiques. Those are normally given to daughters.

**C S Lakshmi: During marriage?**

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

**C S Lakshmi: Aa.....ha**

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

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

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

(...)

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

Jarjum Ete: I actually joined the organisation in May 1985. That happened accidentally, because I was part of a women's cultural group of my own group, and since I was also actively involved with the festivals of, you know, organising festivals. Especially my own community we have this Mopin festival<sup>18</sup>, it's agricultural festival just before the beginning of the agricultural season in the month of April. First week of April-- to be exact, its 5<sup>th</sup> of April we have this. And that year like by the end of the festival our group realised we had more than 4000 rupees contributed by well-wishers and hosts and hostesses. So we didn't know how to use the money and different ideas we tried but we said okay fine and we all agreed to organise a get-together and spend the money. Fortunately or unfortunately everyone who were invited to the, you know, little party again they put into a kitty, and we had much more than what we were actually trying to spend by organising that little party. And then Mrs. Lomte Riba who is actually the founder secretary of the Arunachal Pradesh Women's Welfare Society, she is also one of the forerunners of our tribe's women. And her husband was a senior director in the state government those days. And she said, well, we have this organisation called the Arunachal Pradesh Women's Welfare Society which was registered in 1981. Founded in '79 but registered in '81 and that has been lying defunct because all the founder members had to go out of Itanagar on transfer with their spouses, and that has been lying defunct. So maybe, if the women agree, we could revive this organisation by putting this money in. All of us agreed and everyone who was around, they also supported,

---

<sup>18</sup> Mopin is a festival for wealth and prosperity, good health and universal happiness. It includes smearing of rice powder on faces and is celebrated for five days.

and also even encouraged, saying, you know, our tribe is well known as a forerunner in the state and why not, you know, why can't the women from this group help in reviving the organisation and that's how we pool in the money and the organisation was revived and they inducted me as their chief auditor to keep books and all, but besides keeping books I was the woman Friday of the group. I used to drive my General Secretary up and down Itanagar and Nahanagar to, you know, on my scooter. I used to ride a Bajaj scooter those days. And ever since then I have been with the organisation as a voluntary worker. In fact we still don't have paid staffers; all of us are volunteers. A couple of full-time volunteers and others are part-time volunteers and it is a membership based organisation. And we have been perhaps able to mobilise some sections of the women today, looking back like, you know.

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

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

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

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

Jarjum Ete: That was after I joined the organisation.

**C S Lakshmi: Achha.<sup>19</sup>**

Jarjum Ete: It was part of the growth of the business. Ya, we realised we didn't have a good place to eat out and, you know, to take out family, on weekends, if someone wanted to go out.

---

<sup>19</sup> Term indicating assent, e.g., "I see."

And I had this very lofty idea about thinking people coming together, its something like those-- in Bengal they have those Addas.<sup>20</sup>

**C S Lakshmi: Yes**

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

(...)

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

Jarjum Ete: *Kebong* actually is the word for a council among the Adis, of course the 1950's schedule is of the tribes<sup>21</sup> in the Constitution of India actually doesn't have it but people who are

---

<sup>20</sup>A Bengali cultural phenomenon; a friendly, casual conversation at an informal gathering of like-minded people, during leisure hours; can take place in a public place (restaurant or coffee house) or in a private setting.

<sup>21</sup>There are over 500 communities recognized by the government as Scheduled Tribes and therefore eligible to receive special benefits and to compete for reserved seats in legislatures and schools. A number of traits establish tribal identity. These include language, social organization, religious affiliation, economic patterns, geographic location, and self-identification. Recognized tribes typically live in hilly regions somewhat remote from caste settlements; they generally speak a language recognized as tribal. Unlike castes, which are part of a complex and interrelated local economic exchange system, tribes tend to form self-sufficient economic units.

listed as Abos in the schedule list actually call themselves Adis and Kebong is Adi word. And it used to be actually normally , you know, the council of elders, village elders, wise people of course sans women (with laugh)--wise women were not there. So later on the State Administration, they started incorporating these village councils into their system of administration. This Vikas Kebong actually was started by Sanjay Ghosh.<sup>22</sup> We had NGO representatives from all the states of North-East and we had some discussions about how to involve people in the process of development, initiated by the government, and how the marginalised, rural people, especially the women, can participate and become partners of development. And since, you know, the Kebong doesn't have women traditionally on its councils, we said the Vikas Kebong would be a different kind of council. It will have women like, you know. So people like us joined. Those days I was secretary general of the Arunachal Pradesh Women Welfare Society. It was in mid 90's, and we had started participating in training programmes, capacity building and in-between, like those days Association of Voluntary Agencies for Rural Development-North East (AVARD-NE) the organisation through which Sanjay and his team was working.

**C S Lakshmi: Association of Volunteers?**

Jarjum Ete: Ha, Association of Volunteers for Rural Development among North-East. They were based in Jorhat and they were working very actively in Majuli Island [in Assam], the largest river island, and perhaps the initiatives of the NGOs in involving the marginalised people got into the way of vested interest groups and that's how we look at it when very soft spoken, very kind hearted soul like Sanjay was picked up, and even today it is a debate if he is alive or he was killed by ULFA.<sup>23</sup> So those kinds of things and it kind of pushed back the whole movement, and that's it. But of course after Sanjay was picked up and his whereabouts were not known, and in fact on the demand of the ULFA the Association of Voluntary Agencies for Rural Development-North East (AVARD-NE) was disbanded, and they moved out, today his friends and partners, they are all over north-east working in different capacities from different forums and they are doing very good works and his dream of Vikas Kebong has not happened, but we continue to work in different ways.

**C S Lakshmi: Are there women in Kebongs now?**

Jarjum Ete: In the traditional Kebongs...

**C S Lakshmi: Ya.**

Jarjum Ete: Ya, In fact what we did was also the Arunachal Pradesh Women Welfare Society, the organisation that I have been working with, in 1994 we started mobilising the State network and my home district west Siang, it was also one of the places where we didn't have women on the councils. So the coming of the APWWS network in the district headquarters, women started intervening in cases, especially where a victim or a appellant was a woman, and there were lots of initial resistances by the system, especially the patriarchs of the councils, but finally today

---

<sup>22</sup> An activist on behalf of water and soil management, who was eventually kidnapped and murdered.

<sup>23</sup> United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) was formed on April 7, 1979 to establish a "sovereign socialist Assam" through an armed struggle.



every woman-related case the District Administration sends for the participation of APWWS representative. So, and in many other communities women have started participating in councils, although unofficially but their presence is very much there. But of course there are other tribes where it's not happening yet. But things are moving since mid 90s.

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

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

**C S Lakshmi: That is its mandate?**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(...)

**C S Lakshmi: Jarjum, development policies for women like women's empowerment through several groups or micro-credit programmes<sup>24</sup> and other things. What are your views on that?**

Jarjum Ete: Perhaps if a government has formulated such policies, it must be on the basis of experiences, good experiences they have had in other places. And in Arunachal also SHGs (Self Help Groups) and micro finance things are happening in small ways, not very big. Especially through the DRDAs (District Rural Development Agencies). Unfortunately in my own village, rather my husband's village, I realised when the groups were formed, one, the person who was behind the formation of the group perhaps didn't orient the women. So in the process the village people they have been divided vertically into two groups: the people who have benefited from the DRDA programme and others who haven't. And then from other places the experience has been like this SHGs have been promoted by the people in power. You know, it's not like the government programme for everyone who is in need of it. But it's a government programme which will benefit only the people from the party which voted the party to power. So that kind of

---

<sup>24</sup> The extension of very small loans to poor people who lack collateral, steady employment and a verifiable credit history, and therefore cannot meet qualifications to gain access to traditional credit.

division has come into the society. Unfortunately, as tribal societies, we have lots of community values, where collectivity is the essence. Like even if you go to the farms, it has to be collective work, most of the time. And if you are building a house also, it is a collective work of the whole village. But unfortunately SHGs they have been seen to divide the women. I don't blame the policy but the way the policies are implemented, you know, the agencies are not sensitised, in terms of their own personal orientations about how to organise the women, how to teach them, how to help them, you know, the hand holding techniques they also don't seem to know. And then also they themselves are perhaps not capacitated to, you know, execute these programmes. So perhaps we need more capacity building of the deliverers themselves. (...)

(...)

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

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

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

(...)

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

Jarjum Ete: One, of course the Constitution has lots of provisions for ensuring the equality of both men and women in society. And which actually has not been happening in my state. So right now rather than the teeth and claws our commission would look at our weightage. How much weight we can kind of, you know, put on the government to ensure the implementation of the existing policies especially to ensure the rights of the women. Of course, when we talk about the teeth that the commissions are not having, I believe it's not just legal provisions, but how you negotiate with the system or the people who are dealing with the things. If you can convince, and convincing is something an individual can do kind of, you know, when you are interacting or when you are personally convinced it is easier and perhaps possible to convince the other person to, you know, ensure that the person sees it your way. And that's a difficult thing but not impossible again. And so far the commission is concerned as of now, it's taking time because we are the first batch. And in fact we were constituted in January 2005, but we got this office only in September, first of September it was inaugurated, and I got the telephone some two weeks back. And till then we didn't even have a typewriter. So things are--structurally it's taking time but officially again right now we have very supportive government. At least whenever we say okay this is something is happening they stand by us, especially the district administration, most of

them they say okay, fine, what is it that we can do? (...) So more than the need for teeth and claws, I personally believe it's about the ability of members of the commission or people who are interested in women's empowerment and their rights protection to be able to convince, sensitise and network with the people who matter, especially the administrators, the bureaucrats, and especially with the enactment of, you know, the policies like the domestic violence act and one which is shortly coming up, the prevention of sexual harassment in workplaces, they should be our teeth and claws and not necessary the commission's own act itself. And in a place like Arunachal where all these years customary laws have prevailed over constitutional provisions, the enactment of the Women Commission Act itself in the State assembly, it kind of, you know, gives the sense to people that okay the political structure, the leadership is also keen about giving women their legal space. So I feel it's more about motivations and, you know, becoming sensitised. (...)

(...)

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

Jarjum Ete: (Laughs)

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

Jarjum Ete: Ya...ya. Actually it keeps happening with most of I think Arunachalis – men, women, young boys or old men, everyone. Very interesting events like...even us, when we are walking especially on the streets of may be Delhi especially. Calcutta is I think is used to the slit eyes, you know, chinky eyes. But Delhi, Bombay, the metros, they say, you know, they just started speaking *kanchis* something like that, you know, these little words they know about Nepalis. One of our girls like, you know, she was travelling with her friends in Rajasthan near the Indo-Pak border. It seems one of the BSF jawans<sup>25</sup> said, 'Show your passport, you are not an Indian. So she said of course I am an Indian from North-East. I am from Arunachal Pradesh. And that jawan unfortunately didn't know where Arunachal is. (laughs) And he said but you don't look like an Indian. She said of course if you say that to me, I would also say you don't look like an Indian. You could be a Pakistani, you know, spy walking on our side of the country. So those kind of things keep happening. But hopefully, most probably, things are changing a little ,bit especially in Delhi with lots of North-East people coming in.

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

Jarjum Ete: Ya, ya. This is what they say *ki Hindu log to gai ko puja the hain. Humlog tho gai ko khathe hain. Hum inke bhagwan ko khathe hain to hum kaise Hindu ho sakte hain.* (Hindus worship cows and we eat them. When we eat their gods how can we become Hindus?)

**C S Lakshmi: Ya that thing is there definitely.**

---

<sup>25</sup> Young male soldier.

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

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

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

**C S Lakshmi: Ya.**

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

**C S Lakshmi: Ya.**

Jarjum Ete: Diversity is too much

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

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

**C S Lakshmi: Ya.**

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

**C S Lakshmi: Ya.**

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

Jarjum Ete: I believe every association, or for that matter any interaction with someone who is from a different background, has always kind of enriched understanding and given a perspective to your maybe experiences or even thoughts-- and my association with the Indian Association of Women's Studies and my stint as Joint Secretary in IAWS for one year with, you know, the doyens of the Indian Women's movement and Feminist movements. It has, of course, given me those insights into especially the discourse on feminism, at least a kind of philosophical, theoretical understanding of what all this feminism is about, because for me a...a I actually, as I mentioned earlier also, I got into activism per chance, and my association in the Arunachal Pradesh Women's Welfare Society was an accident. Of course the instinct to come to the defence of girls or women who need support, the empathy has always been there, but maybe we are

doing things without much awareness about what's happening elsewhere, you know, and so my time spent with the feminists of India has added to my understanding, and perhaps that's why I am sitting with you here today being recorded. (laughs)

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

Jarjum Ete: I was in the NGO forum<sup>26</sup> during the Beijing Conference at Huairo and in fact our organisation was accredited to the UN, that year, for the Beijing Conference and the best part was that something like *aaj tak maine samjha tha ki main akeli pagal hoon to bahut saare pagalo ke beech mein aur maaza aaya!* (Until then I'd thought I was the only mad one but I enjoyed being with other mad people!) (both laughs) So like, you know, in small places like Arunachal you feel at times you are the only one who is so concerned but when you realise there are other friends, other like-minded people all over the world, it gives you that kind of energy, the strength to go on, to move on. And also to survive the kind of pressures at times, especially as human rights defenders or even as women's activists. Now of course it has gained a bit of acceptance, but those days it was quite different. And Beijing especially gave me the exposure to, you know, the best part that I learned from my Beijing experience, about the sexuality of women. Because this is something I had personally not had time to give a thought about. But sharing platforms with the lesbians, the prostitutes, you know, those kind of insights which I never had. So I went to the tents and, you know, tried to understand, and it added to my life and its quality perhaps.

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

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

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

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

---

<sup>26</sup> Meeting of representatives from over 2100 non-governmental organizations from around the world parallel to the Fourth World Conference on Women at Beijing in 1995.

**C. S. Lakshmi: Ya.**

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

**C. S. Lakshmi: Ya**

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

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

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



that. And his keenness seemed very genuine, very sincere kind of expressions, body language and even the words. And that was very appreciative, unlike most of our Indian leaders that was a big contrast, like, you know. I have seen some of India's top people you know, listened to them in meetings and all and seen them personally from about six-seven feet distance but except Madhavrao Scindia,<sup>27</sup> not many have been impressive.

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

Jarjum Ete: (Laughs)

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

Jarjum Ete: What kind of a song?

**C S Lakshmi: Any song that you like.**

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

(Both laugh)

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

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

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

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

*Piso pimu-e dukur tadakku, neli komji ngo,*  
Then like the **tapi** blossoms, the young ones ( here **neli komji** means a female) also wither away

*Pado-pa-um-e hujur kaate kula,*  
*Pado ge gupsi lo na, guuba tadak-ku,*  
Even the tender bamboos shoot up to bend with age and burden (of its leaves and branches) in the way of the older generations...

---

<sup>27</sup> A prominent Indian politician and minister from the Scindia family, who formerly ruled Gwalior, and was a 9-term member of the Lok Sabha (parliament) at the time of his death in 2001.

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

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

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

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

\*\*\*\*\*