

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

SITE: INDIA

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

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SPARROW

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

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

Lata P.M. Transcript

Aruna Burte: Lata, we have known each other for the last twenty-two years but it is only today that we have been able to sit and talk to each other comfortably. We will talk about whatever has happened in these years. (...)¹ Let us start with your name Lata Pratibha Madhukar, it includes your parents' name. Why don't you tell us something about them?

Lata Pratibha Madhukar: Yes, even I feel that this is a very good opportunity that I have got today, to speak about my life and SPARROW has given me this opportunity and when you are asking, even I am reviving many memories.... (..) My parents Pratibha and Madhukar have played a very important role in my life... both my mother and father and that is why I feel that every person should put the names of her mother and father in her name. I feel that my parents like other people's parents, had made a major contribution to my life. (..) My mother and father were from two totally different backgrounds, although they belonged to the same community, my mother's background was totally different. Their economic status was very different. My mother's father was in the military and then in the railway. So she got an opportunity to travel to many places, learn many languages and she was introduced to various cultures and she herself was very talented, very artistic, (..) and once when I wrote about her, I wrote how she could transform even a torn cloth to something very beautiful. She had an eye for beauty. (..) My father was brought up as an orphan since childhood, his background was... his family were paan-growers², the paan that we eat. We were from the *barai*³ community. My father's family had a three-storey house in Nagpur⁴ in the central area behind the Tata Parsi School⁵. It was considered a great thing. But I never felt like going there because there was no cultural environment in their house. I used to miss my maternal grandparents very much. I remember one incident from my father's childhood — I feel this was the beginning of feminist thought in me and the basis of the strong feelings I had on domestic violence against women. My father's mother was very beautiful and since they were trading in paan she used to sell paan from home. She had died after being beaten very badly by my grandfather. It was the day of Vat Savitri⁶ and she had been fasting for three days, she was an extremely hard working woman. She used to cook for everybody and only because of his suspicious nature and anger he beat her up. My grandmother's mother-in-law tried to save her. But she died even before she completed her three days' fast. This incident made a lasting impression on my mind and at the age of eleven my father became an orphan. And he was orphaned when he was thrown out of the house. (..) And my grandfather got married again. He was brought up in other people's houses. When my mother came into his life there was a dramatic change for she brought along a different vision and her own way of looking at things, she had her own hobbies. They were really poor when they got married. They did not have any money. Grandfather had not given them anything. But my mother used to do stitching and knitting to make some money. Only when my father got a job in

¹ This interview was conducted over several days. The symbol indicates a break in the interview.

² An after-dinner chew, generally made of nuts, candies and various spices, wrapped in a betel leaf.

³ A subcaste, included in the legal grouping "other backward castes," for which special legal provisions (analogous to "affirmative action") were made.

⁴ A city of over 2 million residents located in the middle of India, state of Maharashtra.

⁵ Jamshedji Nusserwanji Tata Parsi Girl's High School was founded in 1920 by J.N. Tata (1839-1904), a Parsi (Zoroastrian), who accumulated a fortune from many enterprises and endowed many educational and charitable institutions in India.

⁶ A ritual conducted by a married woman for the longevity of her husband's life.

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

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

Lata P.M.: Nagpur is known as the bastion of R.S.S.⁷ and they have an entire office in Nagpur. Hedgewar⁸ and Gowalkar⁹ guruji also stayed there. All the families around us were associated with the R.S.S. Even the school I used to go was R.S.S. oriented. If we didn't wear a bindi¹⁰, we were pinched on the forehead. In my childhood I wanted to work with them and I joined the Rashtriya Sevika Samiti. But gradually I realised that whenever my mother was invited for a meal or for any haldi-kumkum¹¹ ceremony.

Aruna: For any programme...

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

Aruna: Give flowers...

Lata P.M.: And there is a ceremony of godh bhara¹²— they would never do it to my mother. (...) Mother would tell me that this is the way it has been, this has been the tradition. But I realised that this is the way upper caste people behave with the lower caste. There was a feeling that we should aspire to become like them, they are our ideals. I always heard them talking about me as an ideal, in my neighbourhood. I had one or two friends who always got less marks. I would even get prizes in many other competitions like in elocution competition, essay competition and book reviews. Their parents would tell them that even though I was from a lower caste, I was doing so much, which they could not although they were from upper caste.

Aruna: You were bringing awards...

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

⁷ R.S.S. = Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh ("National self-reliance union") a Hindu fundamentalist and right-wing nationalist group, was founded in Nagpur in 1925.

⁸ Keshav Baliram Hedgewar (1889-1940), a doctor and pioneer in Hindu fundamentalism, who founded R.S.S.

⁹ Madhav Sadashiv Glowalkar (1906-1973) took over the leadership of R.S.S. after Hedgewar and was also one of the pioneers in Hindu fundamentalism.

¹⁰ Bindi ("dot"; also called tikka): A dot, made of powder applied on the forehead. It often indicates that a woman is married; however, it is also worn by girls and even men in some parts of India.

¹¹ A get-together of women.

¹² A ceremony conducted by married women for fertility.

understood this, because otherwise I would have never been able to become a feminist fighting against casteism, communalism¹³ and even gender bias.

Aruna: Discrimination between men and women...

Lata: I could not have become a feminist. Whenever I experienced any caste discrimination in school I spoke about it at home. Regarding intercaste marriage, their views were quite regressive. They felt that it should not take place. They were of the opinion that it was all right up to a point like if a boy from the Mahad¹⁴ community ate at our house or even a girl — there should be no caste discrimination. Then my parents introduced me to Mahatma Phule, and we also started getting some very good magazines at home like *Manoos*, brought out by Mazgaonkar.

Aruna: From Pune...

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

Aruna: Humanism...

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

Aruna: They were progressive.

Lata: Non-prejudiced. They had a very liberal attitude — some were from the Sarvodaya¹⁵ movement, and I met some Gandhians also. At that time the grand daughter-in-law of Gopal Ganesh Agarkar used to teach us. Political Science wasn't my subject but she came after college hours. I was very active in extra curricular activities; so I shared a very good relationship with her.

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

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

¹³ In India “communalism” usually refers to prejudice, discrimination, and conflict between different communities (religions, caste groupings). The Gujarat riots of 2002 were an example of communalism.

¹⁴ Mahad: A community belonging to a lower caste in the Hindu caste system.

¹⁵ A movement by followers of Gandhi, after Indian independence in 1947, to bring self-determination and equality to the disadvantaged groups in India. The word was coined by Gandhian disciple Vinobha Bhave.

Aruna: You were telling us about being introduced to liberal beliefs after you did B.A. when you went to another college. How did these beliefs get stabilised during your M.A.? Could you tell us something about this?

Lata: 1975 was the International Women's Year and at that time in Binzani College¹⁶ I met Gail Omvedt¹⁷ and all these other people. I heard Gail Omvedt and other people and at that time I did not know anything...

Aruna: That you would go in that direction...

Lata: Yes, that I will go in that direction but I felt very good. Women from all over the country had been called, all prominent women, it was the beginning, it was Gail's beginning too. None of her books had come out, she was not known, it was just the beginning. There were many other people and I remember that at that time even Rupa and Seema were not in the picture — Rupa Kulkarni and Seema Sakhare who are well known in Nagpur. There were many women who were M.L.A.s¹⁸ in Congress. At that time Congress was in power and all the women who were members in the Rajyasabha¹⁹ had come there. I came to know them and I got the opportunity to arrange this event, as I was a student in the college. (...)

Aruna: At that time you were in B.A. or M.A.

Lata: I was in B.A. and they told us about Tarun Shanti Sena²⁰ under the leadership of Jayaprakash Narayan²¹ and I heard about class struggle for the first time. And then there were many issues and they told us that Jayaprakashji²² spoke about a total revolution and this movement is seven-folded; it has seven dimensions like education, women, etc. I felt very happy women, caste, education and labour were not neglected. It combined all social questions, and also class struggle. I understood it later after reading. After '78 I got interested. After listening to Shubhmurti I decided to join the J.P. (Jaya Prakash Narayan) movement. (...) And I can never forget the Gandhi maidan²³ meeting, lakhs²⁴ of people had come after the death of J.P. and at that time I came to know what youth leadership was, that we were the leaders. After coming to

¹⁶ Binzani Women's College, Nagpur.

¹⁷ Gail Omvedt (1941-), a scholar-activist and author of several books, who works with various social movements and organizations in India, particularly those involving women and farmer. She was born and educated in the U.S., but became a citizen of India in 1982.

¹⁸ M.L.A. = Member of the Legislative Assembly, the state legislative bodies in India.

¹⁹ The upper house of the Indian Parliament.

²⁰ Youth Peace Camp. In these work-study summer camps, youth worked on local projects such as road building. They also studies the conditions leading to their projects as well as broader history of the site in which they were working.

²¹ A political leader in the Indian independence movement of the 1930s and 1940s and later a leader of the Praja Socialist Party. In the 1950s he drew away from politics to work on a program to distribute land to Harijans (Untouchables), but emerged in the late 1970s to oppose Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's imposition of a "national emergency" with his "total revolution" movement.

²² In India, the "-ji" suffix is used to indicate respect and admiration; e.g., "Gandhiji" for Gandhi.

²³ Maidan = A large open space or park, often in the middle of a city, used for informal socializing and also for events, speeches, and public meetings.

²⁴ One lakh = 100,000; 100 lakhs = 1 crore (10,000,000).

Nagpur I decided that although I will do my M.A. my aim will be to do work for the society. And after coming I started work in the Shivajinagar slum. In between my B.A. and M.A. I joined a journalism course. I experienced a different kind of atmosphere there also. (...) For the first time I saw a cosmopolitan atmosphere and my entire vision changed. It was no longer restricted to only the J.P. movement or the movement or even just feminism, so I was exposed to many other things during my journalism course. (...)

Aruna: So this was the atmosphere around you, you were part of different organisations and different programmes. How did you meet your life partner Ravi and decide to marry?

Lata: We met each other in an elocution competition, we used to see each other in various competitions and debates which were held at the inter collegiate level and at that time all these were very popular and at that time Ravi used to feel that I use a highly decorative language and use a lot of superlatives, that I exaggerate things. He had a different style. We competed with each other a great deal. The first time we met was when Acharya Rammurti²⁵ had come and his discourse was arranged. I spoke there, and Ravi was very impressed. He said, "So far I've heard you only in elocution competitions and not giving a speech and you speak very well." At that time I thought he was from the opposition group and he didn't mean it. (...) Gradually we became friends. There was a conference in Patna then and live-in relationships were very much talked about. Ravi felt that we need not marry but can declare our relationship and live together. (...) I thought this was a very delicate matter, a very complicated matter also and at that time I did not agree to this and said that we won't make this announcement here. (...) When we decided to get married we went to tell my parents. And then when we went to meet my mother Ravi bent down and touched her feet. He used to come to our house on his birthday. So my mother asked him why he was doing this for everybody knew his birthday. When we told her we wanted to get married; she got very angry and said nothing. She was knitting something, she kept on knitting, said nothing and became very stubborn and then my father came home at night. By then Ravi had left. Then my maternal grandmother was called for from Delhi. My Nani hit me a lot and asked me how I can go against the community. At that time I realised that caste system was not only a discrimination between higher caste and lower caste but each caste brought along its own customs and rituals and these are followed by a very rigid and strong system and they don't want to disrupt it. Every community has been taught not to compromise in principles and it is great in its own context and that one should get married within one's own community. (...) They vehemently opposed our marriage and moreover Ravi had leucoderma spots²⁶ and they had objections due to this also. I'd told Ravi that they may oppose. Despite so much of progress people are still misinformed about this. (...) Then we felt that many supported us, only a few people didn't. Then I planned my strategy; only my parents opposed it telling me how the community and our relatives will react. So I started telling my neighbours when I would get married. Our landlord, his small children, even they could have leaked it out but I started telling everyone that I was going to get married on 27th March. Even my sisters knew; only my younger brothers didn't because they could have told my parents. I had even written to my uncle who had brought up my father saying that I am marrying Ravi and I think that everyone must bless me because I am doing nothing wrong. And everybody around us knew that we were getting married

²⁵ A disciple of Gandhi.

²⁶ Small white patches that develop on the skin, due to loss of melanin pigment. While the causes are not fully understood, the condition is neither infectious nor contagious. Also known as vitiligo.

except my parents. My aunt knew about it, my aunt's children knew about it, all our relatives knew about it. I wondered why my parents were so scared. Before our marriage Ravi's father had come to my aunt's house and he had seen me. He was quiet by nature, he accepted it but there was a lot of opposition in his family. His mother was very much against an inter-caste marriage. (...) The day I was going to get married I was leaving for college at seven in the morning and I met my father on the road. He asked me where I was going and felt like crying because I was lying. I told him that I was going to college. We got married and we came to Wardha.²⁷ I was not wearing a mangalsutra²⁸ — actually Ravi didn't put a mangalsutra on me. It was a registered marriage. We had decided that there will be no marriage symbols for both of us. My sister-in-law told me to wear the mangalsutra because I was going to my in-laws and if I wanted to compromise with my mother-in-law then I would have to wear it. I wasn't wearing tikka so I had to wear tikka and mangalsutra, only then I could go there. (...) The night I went to my in-laws a journey began for me. It is only then I realised that getting married was not a very easy thing. As I entered I saw an angry and tense environment, no one was talking to one another. My sister-in-law was an engineer she was a professor in VJTI²⁹. She taught electrical engineering, her husband was in Air India then. In spite of that — my mother-in-law was a headmistress — yet they gave me a very rude welcome. There were a lot of utensils to be washed; I drew water from the well and washed them. No one spoke to me. They gave me food but they were so angry that even the sweet rice they had prepared for the occasion was totally burnt. They gave me bhakri³⁰ and milk; I am from Nagpur and I'm used to eating pungent food. I had never had bhakri and milk ever and I just couldn't eat it. From that day my mother-in-law viewed me differently. My plate was kept separate. I was served separately, they ate separately; then I realised I'd no status in that house. Ravi told me that we will adjust, and that I will change the environment in the house. I didn't know that this was the beginning of my war, my jihad; the onus of changing the atmosphere of the house was entirely on me. (...) So on the second day we decided that we will go to Mumbai³¹ and we came to the station, my aunt and one of my friends came with us. Anil and my aunt asked us go home. My mother-in-law and the others said, you are going now and we'll meet when we meet. They didn't speak to me, my sister-in-law said bye, so did the younger nephews. We came home. My parents were no more angry. As soon as they saw us from the terrace they came down and opened the gate of the house and my father removed the gold chain from his neck and put it around Ravi's neck and said that we accept you as our son-in-law and I have forgotten all my anger. (...)

Aruna: We were talking about all the changes a woman goes through during marriage. What were the problems you faced and how did you cope with it?

Lata: Firstly when we were getting married, we were going to start our life together. Many couldn't attend our marriage; we made a very beautiful card for them. When I give that card to SPARROW you'll see two beautiful birds who have set up a nest, a little world of their own, with freedom for both. This is what we had thought our life would be like. (...) From the moment I stepped in that house in Mumbai, in Goregaon, in Bangur Nagar,³² a very nice flat,

²⁷ A city and district near Nagpur.

²⁸ A neck ornament indicating the married status of a woman.

²⁹ VJTI: Veermata Jeejabai Technical Institute.

³⁰ A round, flat unleavened bread.

³¹ Also known as Bombay, the metropolis of over 13 million people on the west coast of India.

³² A middle-class residential suburb of Mumbai.

they had two separate flats, one for my sister-in-law and the other for us, and in such a place from the very first day my food was kept separately. I was served separately; they would not eat the food I cooked. Then we were there for one and a half months. But they never ate what I prepared. (...) After that we came to Wardha and started our own life, I was very happy for the two years we spent there exactly the way it had been before marriage. (...) Ravi was a scientist in Wardha; he was doing some project on biogas and solar energy. We had a different relationship with environment and even my work in the slum areas was going on. I was doing lecturership in Nagpur, going to and fro. Even after all this I was very happy because whichever case — the Chanda Chaudiya³³ death happened then. We were campaigning for that and many other things. But as soon as I came to Mumbai all my activities were restricted. We got married in '80, in '82 I became pregnant with Manu. In the seventh month Ravi got a job in Mumbai. From that time we started having tussles between us because Ravi felt that, as he was the only son, he should look after his parents. And I said that you can look after them no matter where you live. (...) At that time in 1983 I started my work and I want to tell you about an incident through which many of us came to know one another. That there was an organisation like Forum Against Oppression of Women³⁴ in Mumbai, has made all my work so far possible. At that time Manu was six months old and a seven year old girl was raped in Goregaon. I was upset with this case and I felt that I must go to the morcha³⁷ and express my solidarity and for me it was like a need to breathe. I felt that if I didn't, I won't be able to live. I went for that morcha when I came back my mother-in-law's blood pressure had gone up. My husband and my sister-in-law were sitting near her. Even my sister-in-law had come along with me to the morcha but she was not talking to me. Nobody was talking to me and I was totally boycotted. Everybody told me I need not have gone right then. Even Ravi said that I could have gone later, there was no hurry for me to go for social work, at that point. (...) I felt that it was very important for me to get out or else I would feel suffocated and would also feel suppressed from within. At that time I went to S.N.D.T. and met Neera Desai³⁵. After looking at my certificates she told me that I could join from the next day and I joined immediately. I got an opportunity to do research on the portrayal of women in the 19th Century Marathi³⁶ periodicals. This incident happened then. I had to catch the 8:45 local and before that had to finish cooking and other work. I didn't keep Manu in the creche³⁷, I kept her with her grandparents. Only then my mother-in-law would think that kadhi³⁸ should be prepared or some other vegetable should be prepared. I faced many difficulties and Ravi used to help me in the morning and leave. Lot of importance was given to his job. If his first lecture was at 8.30 he should leave by 7.30 to reach on time but even if my muster was at ten there was no understanding that I too had to reach on time. One day I was almost nearing a nervous breakdown and I became very violent and I told her that will I leave this house and not stay here anymore. (...) This was the reason why I decided that I must leave the house. (...) Ravi

³³ Chanda Chaudiya case: A dowry death case in the area of Vidarbha in Maharashtra, which was taken up by the Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini.

³⁴ A women's rights organization.

³⁷ Protest.

³⁵ See Global Feminisms (India) interview with Neera Desai.

³⁶ Marathi is the Hindi-related language spoken in the west-central Indian state of Maharashtra, of which Mumbai is the capital.

³⁷ Day nursery.

³⁸ A soup-like dish made with chickpea flour, yogurt and other ingredients. Often served with dumplings.

and I decided to leave the house and in '82 when Manu was about a year old, in December we left home and started living in a small place in Bhandup³⁹ as paying guests.

Aruna: Lata, you came from Nagpur to Mumbai and after your marriage you went through all this trauma and decided to set up your home separately, but you always felt within you that you should continue with the kind of work you were doing in Nagpur. So how did you link yourself with the various movements and organisations in Mumbai?

Lata: One thing was that I had been in touch with all the activists of Sangharsh Vahini⁴⁰. Staying with Raziya and Shrikant, who were activists, meant a constant interaction. And another thing was I had been going to Nari Atyachar Virodhi Manch⁴¹. Although I had stopped going in between I had already built a rapport with them. So gradually I decided to attend the Friday meetings of Nari Atyachar Virodhi Manch. At that time Manu was very young, she was just about a year old. When I was working in S.N.D.T.⁴² there was a Women's Studies conference in Trivandrum.⁴³ Everyone was really worried about how I could leave her and attend the conference because I was not staying with my in-laws. Everyone said I can't leave her like that. Only Ravi and the people at the creche were going to be there. At that time I was nursing her and I would have suffered too. I was told about so many hurdles but I had decided to go to the Trivandrum conference. It was not only a matter of change for me but also because I wanted to do more work in Women's Studies and so I went for the conference. (...) I forgot to tell you about my involvement with theatre from the time I was in school at Wardha, Nagpur and so I felt that I should do something similar here. Then I decided to talk to people, although there was no time to do professional theatre I felt that we must at least do street theatre and so I associated myself with Nav Nirman Sanskritik Manch.⁴⁴ (...) I decided that I will not just have an academic career but be a full time activist. Although it was a full time job at Women's Centre, it was a campaign group. (...) And they were taking up many cases. I met all of you in the Women's Centre, you all were working there. Nirmala Sathe was there, Flavia⁴⁵, Ammu Abraham, Jessica Jacob, Susie Mathai, Lalita Das, Leela Nanjiyani, Naina Mehta. All of them became my friends. Vibhuti used to come often. Sonal, Swati, Chayanika and the entire of the Forum used to come. I have seen Forum having separate meetings but the entire group was still together and had created very good campaigns. I remember the one campaign, before section 498A⁴⁶ came up. There was a campaign before 498A amendment to not only include domestic violence but also legal redressal for harassment within seven years of marriage. In this campaign organisations like Women's Centre, Saheli, Jagori and many other organisations working around the country with support centres contributed. (...) My experience in Women's Centre was very happy because there were a lot of creative activities there. Many women came with their own

³⁹ A residential-industrial suburb of Mumbai.

⁴⁰ Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini ("Student and Youth Struggle Force"), established by Jaraprakash Narayan as the youth wing of his "total revolution" movement.

⁴¹ Nari Atyachar Virodhi Manch: Forum Against Oppression of Women.

⁴² Shreemati Nathibai Damodar Thackersey Indian Women's University in Mumbai, popularly known as SNDT Women's University.

⁴³ A city of 900,000 people, near the southern tip of India, also known as Thiruvananthapuram.

⁴⁴ Nav Nirman Sanskritik Manch: A theatre group.

⁴⁵ See Global Feminisms (India) interview with Flavia Agnes.

⁴⁶ (IPC) Section 498A - Section 498A of the Indian Penal Code (added in 1983), which defines the offense of matrimonial cruelty.

personal experiences. We started collecting them when we were at the old place at Vakola.⁴⁷ Then we worked day and night and wrote, *Twelve Women, Twelve Households*, an experiment in collective thinking and writing. I could always write but my greatest contributions were the songs, which came easily to me. Some songs were written by me and Nirmala and some were written by me and we had included some seven cases of Women's Centre. Seven of us-- actually twelve of us — were working on it. We raised twelve questions from seven cases. Twelve different questions on twelve issues related to Christian women, Muslim women, tribal women, educated women, housewives, working women and sexual harassment at workplace. Thus we took up the cases that came to us and the ones we did counselling for, the ones we used to talk to and the ones we were fighting for in the courts. (...) My 'Kala Suraj' play was put up at C.U. Shah College of Pharmacy in S.N.D.T. But what I really liked was that all Ravi's students started telling me to write and give them something. Initially I did not even take an honorarium. The first two times I wrote free of charge. But I had written 'Kala Suraj' because, I don't know the exact history of theatre but I felt nothing was written about women and war. (...) There was discussion on how war affects women. What is her identity after the war, what is her nationality, which is her country? She has neither caste nor religion. We considered that at least she had a motherland, a nation. But my play raised the question for the first time if a woman really has a country she can call her own. This brought about a lot of discussion. (...) What gave me most happiness was the play we did with 200 children. We were all with Women's Centre and in Chayanika's house on the terrace all the girls of Forum Against Oppression and at that time there was Forum against Sex Determination and Sex Selection, we will talk about it later. I wrote a play with 200 child actors then at *Arti Rege's* house and *Madhushree Dutta* directed it. Four of us along with 200 children did the street play at *Hutatma Chowk*. Till today no one has been able to do it with 200 children. Neither the group of Matkari, nor anyone has performed this kind of play⁴⁸. At that time there were *adivasi*⁴⁹ children, convent children – we had brought all of them together and improvised with groups of fifty, synchronising the songs, play and action in a street play. (...)

Aruna: Lata, today we see that you have taken part in various movements. Tell us something about the various issues you raised in the movement. Sometimes you participated directly, sometimes you used other creative methods to put forth your views. Let's talk about this. So can you tell us a little about amniocentesis?

Lata: Yes, the first thing is that women's movement has never been only issue-based. But different issues have come up at different times similarly this issue of amniocentesis, later Net En⁵⁰ and Depo Provera⁵¹, I spoke about, we started talking about these issues. (...) The name was Forum Against Sex Determination and Pre-Selection⁵² and many of us were working in it. Harpal, Prita, Chayanika, Swatija, Kamakshi, myself, Ravi, Raghav, Mohan Deshpande, Aruna

⁴⁷ A densely-populated suburb of Mumbai, near the airport.

⁴⁸ Ratnakar Matkari is a famous Marathi author born in 1938. His writing spans many forms, although he is perhaps most famous for his plays. His plays, some of which were geared toward children, generally dealt with social issues.

⁴⁹ Literally, "original inhabitants," a term used for indigenous (before the Aryan conquest-settlement) peoples of India. In the 19th Century, many converted to Christianity.

⁵⁰ Norethisterone enanthate, an injectable progestogen.

⁵¹ A controversial synthetic progesterone contraceptive injection that lasts for 12 weeks.

⁵² A group opposed to the use of sex-determination of a fetus in order to select the sex of the child by aborting the fetus if it is female.

Deshpande all of us took the lead. Aruna came occasionally but Mohan came regularly. We made beautiful posters sitting on the roads. I remember we sat on the roads of Vile Parle⁵³ and began making posters. Many other people came and joined us. Around the same time Ravi's book was published by CED⁵⁴. From Ravi's research we came to know that the proportion in the birth statistics in Maharashtra and Chandigarh was 900 per 1000.⁵⁵ But even today after all the campaigning it is only 922 per 1000 which means that there is a continuous drop in the number of girls. Sex determination was banned first in Maharashtra due to our campaign. But maximum numbers of sex determination centres are here, in secrecy, even today. The interesting thing in this campaign was Meena Menon and Women and Media group also played a very active role in this. They went to the various centres with a tape recorder pretending to be pregnant and asking for an abortion. Even Sanskriti did a very good job, going with the camera to centres advertising along the railway tracks promising a boy child and inviting people to consult them. Ravi, Mohan, Raghav, Harpal, Sanjeev Kulkarni, and others began looking for such quacks and similar people who claimed that they can bring about the births of only sons. The campaign focussed on not only amniocentesis but also on our customs. In this country people do rituals praying for a boy but there is no such thing for a girl. We do kanyadan,⁵⁶ gift away girls in marriage. But for boys we do ritual prayers. So to initiate some thought on this issue Ravi published the book *The Scarcer Half*. This book caused a great stir. We took this campaign even to schools. (...) Manaswani had given a slogan, which became very famous - *Amhi muli sada phuli nahi phunknar chuli*: We girls are ones forever blooming, not ones blowing into stoves. Then we made an album with Junuka's sketches. I remember at Kala Ghoda chowk⁵⁷ all the feminist women of Mumbai coming with their spouses and children and there was a big march of girls and that was when I wrote the play I told you about, with 200 children, which was directed by Madhushree. And I remember Health Secretary D.T. Joseph had come over there and immediately after that he took out a G.R.⁵⁸ that clinics conducting sex determination tests should be closed. This was the first G.R. of its kind. (...)

Aruna: Lata you were telling us about various types of protest; I remember you had written a song on injectible contraceptives and it had become very famous. Will you sing it for us? (...)

Lata: A needle has come into the hospital, Sister, Sometimes they call it Net En and sometimes Depo Provera/ Big countries have laid this trap./ Yes, laid a trap. Laid a trap and made us prisoners. They consider the Third World toys of clay./ A needle has come into the hospital, Sister.

Lata: It's about the Third World women being used as guinea pigs. The women's movement has constantly spoken about it. From the beginning it has talked about it.

Aruna: From the beginning it has talked about it.

⁵³ A suburb of Mumbai.

⁵⁴ Centre for Education and Development.

⁵⁵ That is, 900 girl babies per 1000 boy babies.

⁵⁶ Literally, "gift of a virgin"; a conception of marriage as a gift from the bride's father to the husband.

⁵⁷ Area of the central business and cultural district of Mumbai.

⁵⁸ Government Resolution.

Lata: Yes, be it sex determination test or *Net En* or *Depo Provera*, I remember *Maria Mies*⁵⁹ came here and began talking about all this but we had already spoken about all this, and the campaign included these issues. (...)

Aruna: Lata, through the feminist movement we have raised and had to raise the very important issue of communalism. And you were very active in this movement. Tell us how the movement differentiated between casteism and communalism.

Lata: Firstly, the women's movement included women from all caste and class. There was collective leadership, the most important aspect of the movement was that it didn't belong to any one group. When we talk about the movement we have to take everybody's names. Not just of one individual or any single leadership. Secondly, women from different religions came to the movement. Questions relating to being women and women from a particular religion, both were handled by the movement. For example, there are personal laws based on religion, there are also separate laws for the adivasis and other communities. Apart from that, if a woman is a dalit,⁶⁰ and she has been attacked or if she is a dalit and has been raped or if she is raped and attacked because she is a Muslim or like Bhanwari Devi⁶¹ being raped for being a lower caste woman and teaching Rajputs – this kind of communalism reflected in women's lives, the movement has always opposed. If you see, from 1975 we have always taken a stand on this issue. (...) This work has its drawbacks but it was necessary to work consistently against the forces, which brought women under the sway of communalism. We have to work a lot against it and I feel there was a period of despondency but now women have again risen against communalism and we are all in this together, even you. Those who worked in Behrampada, and Shama, Madhushree, Flavia and others have worked a lot to create a strong resistance but I still feel that we've been unable to control the power of communalism.

Aruna: You have gone on morchas for the movement but simultaneously you also did research. Your research in S.N.D.T was on portrayal of women in the 19th century Marathi journals. It was called *Yug Pravartan Ke Sakshidar*, (Witness to Changes in History). Tell us something about it?

Lata: Actually when I started this work with the Research Centre, it was only a bibliography project but I realised that I was handling a lot of important material, which would become merely bibliographical documentation. Its importance will not be realised. (...) I was identifying rare references and I worked in the Mumbai Marathi Granth Sanghralaya.⁶² I found that many references were not available there. I had prepared a list of journals edited by women. But only two issues of *Abala Mitra* – were there. Even issues of *Kesari* and *Sudharak* were not many. I consulted issues of *Kesari* in Pune.⁶³ (...)

⁵⁹ A Marxist-feminist sociologist who worked for many years in India. She is known for her theory of capitalist-patriarchy.

⁶⁰ The current preferred term of those formerly called “untouchables” or (by Gandhi) “harijans” (children of god). The Sanskrit-derived term means “suppressed.”

⁶¹ Bhanwari Devi: A rural woman trained as a social worker who taught young village girls in Rajasthan. The upper caste people opposed this and consequently she was brutally gang raped as a punishment by the upper caste men.

⁶² Mumbai Marathi Granth Sanghralaya: A library in Mumbai.

⁶³ A city of about 4,500,000 million, 110 miles southeast of Mumbai.

I chose *Vividha Gyan Vistar* and *Marathi Gyan Prasarak* and also *Manoranjan* because Kashi Raghunath Mitra had started it and many women wrote in it. There were many articles of Kashibai Kanetkar who was the first woman writer to write essays. They are mentioned in her books. But even in Marathi literature her work is not mentioned. And while working on this bibliography I came to know about women like Manakbai Lad who was one of the first women to edit journals and she is not mentioned anywhere. (...) I noticed that all these women were from the upper caste. But there were also educated women from the lower caste who were also writing but there was no reference to them. So I looked for more writing, then from the dalit and other communities.

Aruna: After this you started researching another subject, which was related to this subject. You were studying the role of dalit women and women from minority communities in the feminist movement. Tell us something about the questions you started this research with.

Lata: While doing this work I joined the Women's Centre and at the same time there was a lot of discussion going on in R.C.W.S.⁶⁴ about participatory research. It was just the beginning of participatory research and oral history. I was doing research at Vile Parle, Neeraben had given me the work of preparing a documentary. So I was doing a research in the Parle slums. I used to go the Parle slums and interview women and at that time I felt what these women spoke was something very important that no one will know. Alice Thorner and Neeraben had conducted a research and made a documentary about the role of women from slums. They had done this as apart of Women and Development. At that time I felt that these women had done so much of work but what was the position given to them in the movement. Upper caste, middle class women are seen as leaders but these women can't be seen anywhere. She could be from a slum in Parle, or from Akola, or someone like Sayabai from Dhakali, what is the position of these women? (...) At that time there was a lot of focus on Phulwantabai Jhodge in Neelam's work. Stree Mukti Sampark Samiti⁶⁵ decided to celebrate Savitribai Phule's anniversary. We decided to celebrate it in big way on 3rd March [January] at Savitribai's school⁶⁶ in Bhidewada. Only then we met a woman called Phulwantabai who had been working there for many years. She had also been working for the Satyashodak Samaj⁶⁷ and nobody knew about her work. She had kept alive the work of women in Satyashodak. She was recognised then. But there was nothing written about her or Vimlatai Bagal or Nalini Ladke. Actually my research had been done much earlier, but only later Urmila and Meenakshi's book came out. (...) Today Zingubai is very active among the dalit and other backward castes in her community. She is very active in the Panchayati Raj movement⁶⁸ and there are many women like her who were at that time behind the curtain and were victims of silence. The names of many such women are here. (...)
[Daughter Manu has joined Aruna and Lata at this point.]

⁶⁴ R.C.W.S.: Research Centre for Womens' Studies.

⁶⁵ Stree Mukti Sampark Samiti: Co-ordination Committee for Women's Liberation Movement.

⁶⁶ India's first school for girls, founded in 1848, in Pune. Sadvi Savitribai Phule was India's first woman teacher.

⁶⁷ "Truth-finding community," started by Savitribai Phule and her husband, to help liberate lower castes from oppression.

⁶⁸ Panchayat Raj movement: A Indian political movement to devolve power to elected village councils.

Aruna: Lata, creativity is a very important part of you, it is seen in your writings. Like in your stories, poems, verses and essays. We would like to know about them. I feel your creativity began with your writings and as you told us about your mother who could make even small and ordinary things beautiful, similarly about creativity that is reflected in your writings. Tell us something about that.

Lata: Regarding writing I feel that it has always been my medium. Whenever anything happened to me even in my childhood, poetry came to my rescue. Then they were not so refined. I don't even know if they could be considered poetry. When I published them they seemed very flowery. I did not even know if what I felt from within could be called poetry. When I started writing seriously — I had written a lot before my marriage and two or three stories and some poems had been published. I also wrote essays and verses. And at the same time I was doing journalism. I was a reporter in *Nagpur Patrika* and along with all this I felt that I should write or else I won't survive. (...)

Aruna: A source of inspiration for your creativity has been your daughter Manu. You wrote thousands of lullabies sitting along with her and sang them as well.

Lata: I was about to come to that. They are unpublished. No one knows that I wrote those lullabies. My poems are known because they have been published. Stories have been recognised. People know even about my songs but no one knows about the lullabies. She would want a new lullaby everyday. Even now when she comes home very tired, the way we relax is by singing songs. (...)

Aruna: Sing for us...

[Manu and Lata sing together.]

*A drop of rain the sunlight brought
In seconds rose a fragrance from the earth of my mind
It came running like a rising wave
Was it rising in the ocean
Or was it in my heart
A drop of rain the sunlight brought
In seconds rose a fragrance from the earth of my mind
Tir kit tir kit dha
Dance my feet
On the road to the village
with eyes on the sky*

Aruna: Feminism is not bound by national borders. When we were working in Women's Centre you were a full timer. You got a chance then to visit other countries and exchange views. You had gone to Lahore.⁶⁹ Tell us something about that?

⁶⁹ City of 6,000,000 people in Pakistan; before the 1947 partition it was in India.

Lata: I had always been very creative and so whenever there was any creative workshop, everyone used to say that Lata should represent Women's Centre.

Aruna: In workshops...

Lata: We went to such workshops and it was a good opportunity. Even before this there was CENDIT⁷⁰ in Delhi where participants from South Asian countries were going to meet and I got an opportunity to learn video shooting over there. And even film making. And at that time I made friends with many women from other countries like Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nepal. And when Farida from Pakistan went back, they had an organisation called Simorgh⁷¹ — they had a workshop on women and media and she invited me and I went on behalf of Women's Centre for that workshop. This workshop was specially for artists who were going to learn screen-printing and poster making and writing songs and stories. We did not know who else we would meet over there. I already knew Farida, and there I met Lala Rukh and Neelam. I knew Farida but I came to know many others like Shaheen. I came to know them very well. (...) I remember we took a pledge that one day we will go to all national borders. Women from either side of the borders will meet at the borders and bring down all those wires, lines and fences and there will be no boundaries for women. So this was a dream that we shared. (...)

Aruna: I remember there was workshop on leadership training in New Jersey in America. You had participated there on behalf of Women's Centre.

Lata: They sent an invitation to all the organisations in India and had asked for the biodata of all the participants and from these they selected some. They had selected 20 women from 20 countries for a workshop on New Leadership for Women in Rutgers University in New Jersey and 50 applications were sent from India. Women's Centre sent my application and I was selected from among these fifty women from India.

Aruna: You were there for three weeks...

Lata: Yes, it was almost a month. The workshop was for three weeks and after that we visited different places. And I stayed on for some more days and around the same time the International Conference on Women and Health was going on in Washington and I participated in it. I went to Boston and Chicago and visited all the rape crisis centres and battered women's homes, which are shelters. I visited various places like this and they also arranged for me to give talks. (...)

Aruna: Lata, while being very active in the women's movement, you came to a turning point with many questions on your mind and while looking for answers you got involved in the environmental movement and you joined the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA).⁷² What were the changes you felt within yourself, tell us something about it.

⁷⁰ CENDIT: Centre for the Development of Instructional Technology.

⁷¹ A Women's Resource and Publication Centre in Lahore, Pakistan.

⁷² "Save Narmada [River] Movement," an organization opposed to the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam (and others dams), which is being built on the Narmada River in the norwestern India state of Gujarat. The project will displace more than 150,000 people, most of them rural poor.

Lata: I came to a turning point in my work with Women's Centre. I had just come back from America and immediately began counselling and many other things were going on then. There was a case of a Muslim woman by the name of Wahida Kulkarni, which became a turning point. By that time I had already been counselling for seven years and it is a very terrible experience for anyone because one is looking at burnt ward cases and one is experiencing so much of violence and at the same time you have a feeling that you are unable to bring about a change in the system. I had started from a very progressive movement like the Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini, which was about total revolution. So I began feeling that I was getting cut off from the grassroots. We felt that we were working in a very superficial way and fighting legal battles and campaigning for legal rights could not be called people's movement because people were unable to participate directly. People's movements were happening in various places then. On one side were the people's movements on land rights and resettlement issues. On the other side the women's movement was talking about a new kind of humanity. And on the third side groups like CPDR,⁷³ PUCL⁷⁴ were raising the issue of human rights and that movement was also there. But slowly issue-based movements began which were not only talking about displacement and resettlement but also raised other questions. Like the movements for the right to information, right to work and the right to life. The right to life movement had three important demands. The rights on land, water, and environment.

Aruna: Water, land, jungle.

Lata: The whole environment. I began to feel closer to all the environmental movements. I observed that the developed countries were destroying the natural resources of the third world countries. And they were unconcerned. Not that there were no protests. The fight to save our natural resources began at various levels, like the Chipko movement.⁷⁵ We consider Chipko movement to be a part of women's movement but the movement in itself is quite a big thing. I wondered what could be done along this line. Medha's name was coming up quite often and then she was working in Maharashtra. Even earlier, I was at the Women's Centre, when Medha and Arundhati had their first *dharna* in Mumbai we had gone from Women's Centre to help them. (...)

Aruna: You had gone in support of the Narmada Bachao Andolan.

Lata: To support. To decide what all the supporters could contribute. Some could contribute food, some could give economic help, some could go live in the valleys, some could join as full-timers. We were invited for this reason. I had gone to that meeting. I remember we were all sitting on the terrace of BNHS (Bombay Natural History Society) where the meeting was held. After the meeting suddenly they told me that Medha was asking for me. Medha said, "I'm making you an offer as you are not presently with Nari Kendra." I had taken a break then. "Will you work with us and will you co-ordinate our activities in the whole of Mumbai?" It was a good opportunity for me and I was also looking for something like this and I had suddenly got the opportunity to do this work. (...) The people for whom I was fighting were involved in this. Like

⁷³ CPDR: Committee for the Protection of Democratic Rights.

⁷⁴ PUCL: People's Union for Civil Liberties.

⁷⁵ An organised resistance, spread throughout India, to the destruction of forests.

the displaced people needed to be resettled and this concerned adivasis, dalits, and other backward castes and women were the majority. Many issues were present in it. The Narmada Bachao Andolan was there to question such developmental policies. It is generally said that the Narmada Bachao Andolan or the Chilika movement⁷⁶ or the Silent Valley movement⁷⁷ of Kerala are issue based. But these movements created an awareness about developmental policies. Till today development was understood as progress. Big dams, big buildings, big projects and big plans. It was not very easy to work against these big projects because big powers were involved like the World Bank and WTO. IMF was giving monetary fund. Global powers were behind these projects and the fight was against them. We were not only fighting at home but were also fighting the world. This was the picture. It wasn't very easy, for *if an adivasi fought in the Narmada valley the impact was felt by the President of the World Bank*⁷⁸. This was difficult for the common man to understand. But this was happening. To me it seemed very important to reject the development perspectives and propose an alternative policy and initiate discussion on it. (...)

Aruna: Lata, you said that Narmada Bachao Andolan is not just opposing big dams but is presenting an alternative perspective...

Lata: Why were the big dams opposed for even that was part of alternative development. What are the things that a big dam destroys? Whatever great progress has been spoken about is actually endangering the environment. The studies on flora and fauna have proved that they destroy even the smallest thing that preserves the environment like for example hilsa, which is a river fish and considered endangered — its death is certain. Then there are so many issues related to land, for new land cannot be created. Building a big dam means displacement of many people. Where will they live? They will move to big cities, metropolitan cities and slums will increase. Slums are increasing because people have been displaced. But people say people have come and made slums and so there is more garbage. But this is not so. All these are all interlinked. It is the development policy that decides who should be displaced and where they will go. They will go to big cities to provide cheap and bonded labour, they'll work and they will die. There will be no commitment for them; this is the structure of the entire model. The third thing is that like land, they have created an enormous myth about water that we have water and if we make a reservoir people will have more water. But a reservoir in 50 years. There is a very nice song in the Narmada Bachao Andolan that says — a promise of fifty years and a bet of several lakhs. Lakhs will be destroyed, lakhs will lose land. In Narmada 1.5 lakh hectare land⁷⁹ will go under water, under the dam. Then they said that 1.5 lakh hectare of land is going to be cultivated. Nobody has ever seen statistics this way. They are drowning already irrigated land. And they say that 1.5 lakh hectare land will be cultivated and not that the same amount will go under the dam. It's like reaching your mouth the other way. This is not a solution; after destroying you talk of creating something out of it. This is not the way to development. Development is something, which

⁷⁶ Save the Chilika movement, a successful resistance movement, started by fishermen around the Chilika lake in Orissa in the early 1990s, against a project of intensive prawn cultivation and export which was a direct threat to their livelihood.

⁷⁷ Opposed the construction of a dam for a hydroelectric project in Silent Valley, a dense rainforest in the south Indian state of Kerala.

⁷⁸ The controversy over the Narmada River dam project led the World Bank in 1993 to withdraw from financing the project.

⁷⁹ About 371,000 acres or 580 square miles.

allows whatever is growing, flowering, bearing fruits to continue. Let its seeds spread and grow again. This is the natural process of growth and this kind of development is breaking this cycle. (...)

Aruna: Could you tell us a little about jal samarpan⁸⁰?

Lata: If no one leaves, no dam will be built. That has been the role taken up by N.B.A. The decision to stay and not move out was taken by the adivasis themselves and not the people who came to the movement from big cities including Medha herself who was leading the movement. The adivasis took the decision to stay there and not let the dam be built.

Aruna: Which year was this?

Lata: The movement started in 1985 with this announcement. And all this happened in '87, '88 and when I joined in 1992 there was an announcement of jal samarpan in 1992.

Aruna: I remember that there was a meeting in Mumbai in Dadar⁸¹ to support this organised by the Nirbhay Bano Andolan⁸² and the Shiv Sena⁸³ people tried to break that meeting.

Lata: At that time this was a big thing and Narasimha Rao was the Prime Minister then. They had decided to increase the height of the dam and then Medha gave a call for *jal samarpan*. It created a big wave in the media and people said *jal samarpan* meant suicide and how such a decision could be taken and began calling the group a suicide squad. It was a very difficult task to manage the whole thing. At one end one had to keep track of the people working in the valley and then coordinate the activities in Mumbai. At that time some were managing the movement in Bhopal and some in Delhi. What was unique about the movement was that we were all in the coordinating committee and all of us were in the core group. We knew about the internal decisions and once we came out we did our own individual work. And each one has to manage a fort; it was a kind of warfare but a nonviolent warfare.

Aruna: You can't call it a war

Lata: Yes, it was not confrontational war but it was a kind of an answer we were giving them in a peaceful way. (...) There were also attempts to break the meeting at Dadar. I remember it was the 6th of August and *jal samarpan* was to be on the 7th and *jal samarpan* could happen anytime on the 7th. Sixth was a very critical day and our hearts were beating very fast.

Aruna: There was a lot of stress, a lot of mental stress.

⁸⁰ "Sacrifice in water," or remaining motionless in the face of incoming waters, unto death, as a protest.

⁸¹ A suburb of Mumbai.

⁸² "Do not be afraid movement," organized in Mumbai, to give education and legal assistance to poor and marginalized people regarding their rights.

⁸³ "Army of Shiva" [the Hindu god of destruction], a right-wing Indian political party centered in Mumbai. It has been accused of using violence; e.g., attacking movie theatres in Mumbai to get the film "Fire" withdrawn, and vandalizing a cricket pitch in Delhi to stop the Pakistani cricket team from playing there.

Lata: There was lot of stress. I remember the meeting was in Vanmali Hall and it was so full that people were standing all the way to Chabildas Hall. They wanted to know what was going to happen next and the entire responsibility was on me.

Aruna: I was there in the meeting.

Lata: I gave a lot of details in my speech, which even today people tell me was unforgettable. I appealed to everyone saying why this *jal samarpan*. Not to commit suicide but because there is a limit to any *satyagraha*⁸⁴ and this satyagraha had reached its limit. (...) Medha was supported by all strata, by all progressive and like-minded people. That day I came across as a woman who was a witness, a participant and a leader in the struggle. (...)

Aruna: Narmada Bachao Andolan raised many important issues involving the environment about which you have mentioned earlier. You also told us about the various struggles and campaigns you organised. But I feel that there is also another important aspect of the movement and that was the National Alliance of People's Movement (NAPM), which is still active. You played a very important role in it. Tell us something about it.

Lata: It is very important that I tell you about the entire process, how it evolved. Many supporting groups joined the movement and there was constant networking. The movement's own coordinating group that is, the core group, also had many people. (...) There were fifty-fifty votes in NBA whether NAPM should be formed or not. Those who supported Medha including me, had thought about NAPM and supported it. They felt that there should be some work at the general level also. So far we had only spoken about networking with people's movements. It was necessary to take political initiative in that direction. A big role in this was played by National Fish Workers Forum, Azadi Bachao Andolan⁸⁵, NBA, Samajwadi Jan Parishad⁸⁶, Chilika Bachao Andolan of Orissa, Chennayyaji's Peasant⁸⁷ and Dalit Movement of Andhra, they joined the Peasant movement and Dalit movement and started a movement, then Pennurimai Iyakkam⁸⁸ of Tamilnadu — with Gabrielle Dietrich⁸⁹ — that organised people living on footpaths, many such movements joined it. I cannot name all of them because there were so many. We decided to choose one issue to fight for and decided that the alliance will be the first *manch* of its kind to also fight globalisation and show its solidarity. This manch was set up in Sevagram and it is now eight years since NAPM was established.

Aruna: In 1996...

Lata: It was in 1996, so it is eight years — in 2006 it will be 10 years. It started in Sevagram. The first issue we decided to fight in NAPM was the Enron issue. (...) NAPM was an alliance where the active members were elected. Based on votes, there were eleven national conveners

⁸⁴ "Truth force," a term originally used by Gandhi to describe his nonviolent protest movement.

⁸⁵ A national movement in India to counter the influence of foreign multinational corporations and western culture,

⁸⁶ "Socialist People's Association," an Indian political party dedicated to Gandhian socialism.

⁸⁷ Chennayyaji's Peasant movement – Peasant Movement in the south Indian state of Andhra Pradesh.

⁸⁸ Pennurimai Iyakkam - A women's rights movement in Chennai [formerly Madras], in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

⁸⁹ A feminist scholar who has been writing and working in Madurai (a city in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu) on women's issues.

and one amongst them was chosen as the national co-ordinator, then a co-ordinator. I was chosen repeatedly for two years as the national convener. These elections were held every two years, so I was a National Convener for four years.

Aruna: That must have been a very big responsibility.

Lata: Yes, it was a very big responsibility. (...) I feel that with the networking I had done with other groups and organisations in Mumbai – in the four years of my tenure as Convener in NAPM, the best thing was that I was able to develop a special relationship with the local groups in Mumbai. The important fact I understood was that globalisation did not affect only the middle class but the common people whose jobs were threatened and what their fate was to be. (...) I remember, the hopeful thing was that we could fight against globalisation. Along with it was a rising hope that we could make a new world. It was the beginning of the making of a new world and I feel proud that I was a part of it.

Aruna: Lata, you were just now talking about the NAPM. I feel that when one is in the movement one suffers a lot of mental stress, and it also gets reflected in one's personal life. I feel that you should talk about this also.

Lata: There have been situations in my life when I felt that it wasn't easy. I am talking about a time in which I was totally immersed in activism but I am not just an activist, I am a mother, a wife and I am related to many and I am also a human being I have my expectations and I have my responsibilities as a mother and I have a personal life of my own. It happens with many who come into public life that their personal life gets affected. And I have been told many times that because I'm a full time activist—even in the women's movement I had a leadership role. I gave it up and came back to grassroot level work and I rose to leadership position in NAPM. But I have always been an activist and also a writer. However, people have always seen me as an activist. They say that I desire to be a leader. When I could not spend time with Manu, my male colleagues were not very sensitive about this. In NBA despite men and women working together, not those in the core group, but others in Mumbai always told me, you want to become Medha Patkar⁹⁰; you are very ambitious and that's why you are sacrificing Manu. Whenever I had an important responsibility they used to say this. And I'd feel very hurt and cry on reaching home. Ravi and Manu used to reassure me and tell me not to take these things to heart because they didn't feel this way. (...) I always felt that the foundation of our life together has been very strong. There was a lot of sharing, even in housework but the economic decisions were always taken by Ravi. (...) Although it's a matter of our family and Ravi does have the responsibility, but Ravi failed to notice many things. I've been very hurt for whenever I wanted to spend I had to ask Ravi. (...) At this time, till the journey to Enron, my work kept increasing. So did my thyroid problem. I didn't know that tension is linked to the secretion of thyroxine. I started getting attacks of depression and I had a nervous breakdown. Many don't talk about all this openly but I wish to talk, specially in an oral history like this so that even after 50 years if someone were to listen to this, at least a psychiatrist, it could be noted that a woman doesn't go through all this because of some hysteria or because there is something the matter with her

⁹⁰ Indian social activist who led opposition to the Sardar Sarovar dam project. With other activists, she later founded the National Alliance of People's Movements, which opposes globalisation and “corporatisation.”

stomach or because of some organic disease. It is very important to find out the reasons behind such problems. (...) Today I am surprised that this film is being made on me because the names mentioned like Mahasweta Devi or Veena Mazumdar or Neera Desai⁹¹ — I am counted as an activist among them. This gives me recognition and I really don't know how to thank for I've always been denied recognition. (...) You will see that whatever photos I have I am always in a mob. You must have seen Anand Patwardhan's *Narmada Diary* film. When they took Medha away everyone was there. Anand Phadke and others were witnesses.

Aruna: When they were force feeding...

Lata: Yes, when they were force feeding. I was present there at that time and in a leading role. But in Anand's film I'm nowhere; I'm there only for half a second in Hutatma Chowk. This has happened not only with me but with many full timers despite second rank leadership positions. This is why they broke down. I feel that the strong NBA leadership was broken down because of lack of recognition. (...) I feel that this has not been written in anybody's autobiography and I am narrating this personal account. Women don't write because...only Usha Dange has written — she was Comrade Dange's⁹² wife. She has written that she had many nervous breakdowns but even she hasn't written the complete story. She has written in her autobiography that people have even called her a mad woman. As the wife of a Trade Union leader, she took care of them, fed them and did other things; but she always felt economically deprived. (...) A lot has been written about male activists. Regarding women full-timers, there is a notion that her husband will provide for her. And we cannot talk about our economic tensions. It's true that Ranade who may visit me is even more deprived. At least, I have a shelter but people like him have lost their houses. So how can I sit and cry about my own problems? My sorrow can't be expressed even within the movement. And where'll I go? I'll have to establish myself, economic esteem, and become somebody. (...) I have an M.A., I have done research in an university. So I have at least some options but what about the person who has given up his or her entire career and has not studied beyond the 12th standard for the sake of the movement? Today that boy is drinking heavily because there is nothing and he is in deep depression and no one bothers about him. A boy like *Sunil Bodke* is today completely depressed because he believes there will definitely be a revolution but how can we bring it about with *so much saffronisation*⁹³ and other things? And parents say, first you earn and then you talk about all this. He can't speak until he earns. Until he earns he has no place in the house. What will people who have given away their entire lives to such movements do? (...) Today I can see that none of the movements have full timers. We say that NGOs have taken over but no one has thought about the personal lives of these full-timers — about their wives, about their husbands, if they are women, about their children. I feel it is very important to think about all this. I have written a poem about Gujarat and I write a column in *Mahanagar* but I feel my creativity, on which we spoke so much, is spent out. After that I couldn't think of a story, couldn't write a poem, no words come to me. I feel that creative fiction, which comes from within, for which you don't need reference books, has died within me. I'll read the poem.

⁹¹ See Global Feminisms (India) interviews with all three.

⁹² Comrade Shripad Amrit Dange was a leader of the Communist Party of India, a committed revolutionary and dedicated leader who played a major role in shaping India's trade union movement.

⁹³ Movement to infuse Indian society, especially education, with Hindu ideology and values.

*Truly, I can't find any words
 Someone has openly assaulted my poem in Gujarat
 A walled city has entombed so many Anarkalis⁹⁴
 In the open,
 Stripping them of their pajamas and salwars⁹⁵
 They have seen their religion that once resided in their hearts
 In the open,
 Stripping them of their pajamas and salwars
 They have seen their religion that once resided in their hearts
 No one has bound my hand and foot
 But my young daughter clinging to my knees
 Sometimes becomes the cover for my cowardice
 There is nothing I can do to save my poem
 I can surmount those walls and reach that city
 Now even train compartments become empty on the way to that city
 But the arriving train, with some bundles and some babies,
 Some women, some men, and some old
 Comes crammed to capacity
 I have not seen anyone carrying the Koran or the Bible
 Has anyone seen Hindus with their holy books while travelling?
 Amidst their anointing, sacred threads and auspicious timings,
 Amidst rubble, stands a crowned Ram
 Amidst their anointing, sacred threads and auspicious timings,
 Amidst rubble, stands a crowned Ram
 Ram no longer symbolises the ideal state
 Ram has just remained the Ram
 With the tendency to suspect
 And put to test Sita's character
 I have only one request
 If you find in my poem
 Any word of mine, do inform me
 It's possible some temple builders
 May have razed it, mistaking it for a masjid⁹⁶
 It's possible some temple builders
 May have razed it, mistaking it for a masjid
 Or it's possible that in Godhra⁹⁷
 It may have been violated
 But my poem was neutral
 Beyond religion, race and caste
 Pronouncing it pseudo-secular*

⁹⁴ Anarkali was a courtesan in the court of the Moghul (Muslim) Emperor Akbar who ruled India. His son Salim fell in love with her. The emperor disapproved of this relationship and punished both of them. Anarkali was buried alive. Here Lata refers to young girls who lost their lives during the Gujarat communal riots.

⁹⁵ Loose trousers that, with a kameez (shirt), are a form of traditional dress for women in some parts of India.

⁹⁶ Mosque.

⁹⁷ Gujarat city; site of a 2002 attack on a train carrying Hindu activists that precipitated intense anti-Muslim violence in that state.

*Someone may have browbeaten the word
It has probably gone underground
Like an activist
Hope my poem has not inherited my disposition
To verbalize, to raise its voice,
Hope it is not afraid
Poem, if you have gone to adorn, like henna,
The palms of those helping at the relief camps
Or to console a child looking for its mother
Or if you can take away that blindfold
And tip the scales in favour of truth
Or on seeing a burning tyre encircling somebody's neck
You have rushed to help that person
If you find it meaningless to mark
The religion of a child from any womb
If you become the strength that wards off swords
Then Oh Poem, I do not regret your loss
But what I do lament is
You, who accompanied me to my conventions and conferences,
Where are you lost?
Truly, I can't find any words.*

Aruna: Lata, you spoke about your feelings, about the moments when we feel absolutely lonely. But I feel that with your activism and other qualities there is flow in your life. Why don't you read a poem, which talks about this aspect of your life?

Lata: I will read the poem where I am talking about this flow in which I have asked the river to reassure me. I feel that even other activists must be feeling the way I do. It is true that life is like a flowing river. I am reading a few portions from a long poem. They will not seem like broken fragments for each portion is a poem by itself.

*River, our acquaintance is very old
You met me during childhood,
Then you caressed my cheeks,
And moved ahead rapidly
Holding my wee finger, my mother dragged me away
But I could not overcome the temptation to touch you
River, I met you at my maternal uncle's village
Where my mother's face radiated calm composure
As she approached the temple with offerings for my uncle's wedding
Mother and aunt sat by your banks
Conversing in leisurely soft tones
While I stared fixedly, enchanted by your beauty
As I stepped into your blue waters, topped with white foam
You offered me a seashell smooth
Which I preserved ever after (...)*

*River! For some days you and I were one entity
As if I were you; tumultuous, tempestuous
Unstoppable, flirting with the banks, free
Your exultant cry, and my warbling
There was not much to choose between the two
Your alluring elasticity had me enamoured
And I lost all sense of self
Sometimes simple, sometimes playful, sometimes unrestrained, sometimes calm
When my mother mentions my marriage
My passion I hide
And like you, I wail, but inwardly
Tell me oh river, amidst this torrent
Is there a way to measure tears? (...)
River! The seeds burgeoning within me
Like a field replete, spread through the settlement
River! Now this flood won't abate
And now you are so inseparable
The seashells, pearls and hidden treasures in you
I do not wish to lose
Our relationship, like a new shoot
Like a cataract, rapid
It's true, the flood won't abate now!*

The End