

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

**SITE: INDIA**

**Transcript of Neera Desai  
Interviewer: C. S. Lakshmi**

**Location: Mumbai, Maharashtra, India**

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**SPARROW**

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**Neera Desai** is a pioneer in the field of Women's Studies and a nationally and internationally known scholar. She set up the first Research Centre for Women's Studies in SNDT Women's University, was its first Director, and served in that capacity for many years. Her much-acclaimed research works have been published in Gujarathi and English. She is 78 years old and is currently working on a book based on interviews conducted with more than one hundred feminists in the western region of India on the social construction of feminist ideology.

**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).

## Neera Desai Transcript

**C.S.Lakshmi: Neeraben<sup>1</sup>, you have been known as one of the pioneers in Women's Studies and some people even refer to you as one of the mothers of Women's Studies. I don't know how you feel about that. You've written a lot both in Gujarati<sup>2</sup> and in English about your evolution as a feminist. Could you tell us some of the elements that have gone into this evolution?**

Neera: Lakshmi, I feel not only excited but also a little nervous and thrilled that over a period of more than seven decades, I have come to a stage where I can talk something about how I grew up and what has made me a feminist. Each one comes I think through one's own experiences, through one's own environment and through one's own predilections. I have also come through my own background, in which I think one of the initial backgrounds, which has affected my mental makeup and my value structure, is my family. If you just ask me, what was my family background and what was the nature of the family relationship, I think I would say that it was middle class, educated, upper caste<sup>3</sup> family. We lived in Bombay<sup>4</sup>. In fact, from the first year of my age, my father shifted to Bombay and that is how my, though I've been born in Gujarat, my entire upbringing has been in Bombay. My father was a professional, he was a solicitor<sup>5</sup> and we had, I would say, a very liberal atmosphere in the house. I was the second in our four siblings. I had an elder brother. I grew up in an atmosphere where my father had political interests, though not affiliations. But it was a political affiliation to the Indian National Congress<sup>6</sup>. And my mother, who had hardly studied up to seventh standard<sup>7</sup>, in those days I think it was considered to be a highly educated state, she was a very dynamic person and a very progressive woman, a very encouraging mother, with giving freedom to all the children to do whatever they liked.

I would like to say something about my mother which is something very special and which has affected me, till today, is her liberal attitude, her involvement in all good, progressive activities. She took active part in the non-cooperation movement<sup>8</sup>, which was in 1930; she went in the morning to those marches, Prabhat Pheris<sup>9</sup>, as they were called. She used to wear khadi<sup>10</sup> for

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<sup>1</sup> The suffix *ben* to a name is a common way of addressing a woman in the Gujarati community in India. It means "sister" but is used more as a respectful way of addressing a senior person.

<sup>2</sup> Language spoken by the majority in the Western state of Gujarat.

<sup>3</sup> The caste system is the system of social classes in the Hindu society. The basic castes are Brahmins (priests and teachers), Kshatriyas (Warriors and leaders), Vaisyas (traders and merchants), Shudras (untouchables, polluted labourers). The basic castes were further divided into hundreds of sub-castes on the basis of region, food habits and so on.

<sup>4</sup> Now known as Mumbai, capital of the state of Maharashtra in West India.

<sup>5</sup> Attorney.

<sup>6</sup> The oldest and largest political party in India formed in 1885. It played a major role in the Indian independence movement and has been the ruling party in most of independent India's governments. Leaders include the Nehru family, and the Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh.

<sup>7</sup> Seventh grade.

<sup>8</sup> The movement was initiated by Mahatma Gandhi, who in 1920, began to protest British rule in India through a policy of passive resistance.

<sup>9</sup> Meaning "morning rounds", in this context *prabhat pheris* refers to mobilizations in which people walk through the streets singing and chanting to raise awareness of a particular issue or cause.

some time and she used to sell khadi to various people. She took part in all the neighbourhood activities, she took part also in educational activities and this is, I think, the atmosphere, which we all children got-to associate ourselves with the larger interest than merely confining ourselves to the family life. I was, from the beginning, interested in lot of outside activity and I think somehow or the other, the seed of sensitiveness to women's issues were there. I don't know how it came to me, but I think and here I think I would like to describe one incident of my childhood.

You see, I must be about seven or eight years old at that time. We were on vacation in Ahmedabad<sup>11</sup> and there was one house opposite our house where a couple was staying and they were a very loving couple in that sense and they would naturally like young girls and children coming to them and meeting and playing in their house because they had no child in their house. So they were very hospitable to me and then, one day, when I'd gone there, the wife was, I think, heating the milk, and there was one friend of her husband had also come. So both the friends were talking with each other very intimately and then he suddenly saw that the milk was boiling and coming to a boiling point and so he just addressed his wife and said that, "Just look at it" and she was talking to me very enthusiastically and [at] the same time, a cat came, and cat overthrew the pot. All these things happened in an instance, but that husband of hers jumped from his seat, gave a big thrashing to his wife and till today, Lakshmi, let me tell you, [that] the screech of that thrash is pinching me. This has remained in my heart very much and perhaps it might be the beginning of some sort of sensitiveness to women's problems, women's issues.

### **C.S.Lakshmi: Neeraben, which school did you go to?**

Neera: In pre-independence period<sup>12</sup> and also the first two decades of the post-independence period, the school has played a tremendous role in building up the consciousness, particularly the consciousness of working for others, nationalist consciousness<sup>13</sup> which perhaps later on, we missed. Of course, right now, I would more talk about my school, and it was a nationalist school<sup>14</sup>, established by Theosophists<sup>15</sup> under the influence of Annie Besant<sup>16</sup> and others, and as the title suggests, it was called Fellowship School. It was a co-educational school<sup>17</sup> and today

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<sup>10</sup> A hand-spun cotton material, which became the symbol of the freedom struggle in India. Mahatma Gandhi inspired people to shun western materials and clothes and khadi also became a symbol of self-rule.

<sup>11</sup> The capital city in the state of Gujarat.

<sup>12</sup> India gained independence from Britain on August 15, 1947.

<sup>13</sup> Awareness or consciousness of a desire for independence from the British in the late nineteenth century; began the organized move against the British, which culminated in independence in 1947.

<sup>14</sup> A school whose primary focus was (in the pre-independence era) the instilling of a nationalist consciousness, central to the "Quit India" movement, the resistance to British rule in India on a national scale.

<sup>15</sup> Theosophy, literally "knowledge of the divine", is a body of ideas which holds that all religions are attempts by humanity to approach the absolute, and as such each religion has a portion of the truth. Modern Theosophy, as a coherent system of thought, developed from the writings of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky. Together with Henry Steel Olcott, William Quan Judge, and others she founded the Theosophical Society in 1875.

<sup>16</sup> An Englishwoman who came to India in 1893 and adopted it as her motherland. She became part of the Indian resistance against the British in the late 1890s. She was an active reformer in the fields of education, birth control and religion. She set up the Central Hindu College at Varanasi which eventually became the prestigious Benares Hindu University. She created the Theosophical Trust and played a great part in fostering national pride and consciousness. She was president of the Indian National Congress in 1917 and died in India in 1933.

<sup>17</sup> A school that both boys and girls attend.

also, many people ask me whether it was a vernacular medium<sup>18</sup> or English medium but in those days, these media problems were never there because we learnt through both the languages and so nobody thought about the medium.

**C.S.Lakshmi: Neeraben, which college did you go to?**

Neera: Lakshmi, before I talk to you about my college, let me say something about the location of the house, more particularly because after the forties, the location of the house has tremendous significance in influencing the mind and bringing us to the hard realities of life. The one hand, to the right hand side of my, our building, there is one lane and then adjacent, there are two houses. The first house is okay, but the second building which is very close, is known as Raj Bhavan<sup>19</sup> and Raj Bhavan – there are two Raj Bhavans in Bombay. One is the Raj Bhavan where the Governor<sup>20</sup> resides and the other Raj Bhavan is where the Communist Party of India<sup>21</sup> was located and CPI had its location in Raj Bhavan adjacent to our house and secondly at that time, it was a commune where many of the leaders were staying there. So initially, because the Communist Party was against the war, there was no problem but later on when the Communist Party became the allies, when Soviet Russia became the ally of the British, while the Congress was against the war. Whenever there would be meetings, particularly on Saturdays and Sunday evenings at Chowpatty<sup>22</sup>, the crowd absolutely armed with stones and other things, would come to that building, throw stones at them and shout anti-war slogans as well as anti-CPI slogans and that was influencing our mind considerably about the nature of the Left Party, confrontation of the political groups. Another important item, I would say important feature of the location, is that our house was in a way, a borderline between the Muslim locality and the Hindu locality<sup>23</sup>. Just two or three buildings on the left, after that, the Muslim locality started. So particularly during the communal riots<sup>24</sup> and when the communal frenzy was there, we had a very, very tense time. And this is why I would say that in this formative period, the currents of, on the one hand, political rivalries and political debates and discourses were also affecting, and on the other hand, the communal, the communalism and the rabid communalism I would say, was also we were exposed to.

**C.S.Lakshmi: Neeraben, the '40s were very turbulent times and I remember 1942 you joined college and those days must have been very interesting, full of different kinds of experiences. Do you think the feminist that you became later, there was, some kind of foundation in these years for that person to emerge?**

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<sup>18</sup> A school where the primary language of learning is the language of the state or any other Indian language, depending on which group has established it.

<sup>19</sup> The house of the governors of each State.

<sup>20</sup> Head of State appointed by the President of India, s/he is not elected directly by the people unlike the Prime Minister of the country or the Chief Minister of each State.

<sup>21</sup> (CPI) formed on December 26, 1925 in Kanpur, India; based on Leninist and Marxist socialist ideologies; the CPI (M) or Communist Party of India (Marxist) in West Bengal formally split from the CPI in 1964; various branches of the CPI support and ally with different parties in different states.

<sup>22</sup> A popular beach in Bombay.

<sup>23</sup> Many parts of India exhibit this trend, Muslims and Hindus live apart from each other and form highly segregated communities.

<sup>24</sup> Riots between diverse religious groups, but most particularly between Hindus and Muslims.

Neera: I think '42 was a very an important year for me for various reasons. One was that for the first time, I joined the college, so coming out of the school precincts, it was a new experience, but very exciting. I joined the Elphinstone College<sup>25</sup> which has been considered very prestigious and elite college, but also very turbulent college. It was '42; I passed in June. July, the college started and August of the same year, seventh and eighth were the most memorable days, when the Congress under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi<sup>26</sup> passed the Quit India Resolution<sup>27</sup>. I consider myself very fortunate that I was at that historical meeting. I attended along with my family, that is, my parents were also there, and it was a very exciting moment. But the next day, 9<sup>th</sup> August, we heard that all the leaders were being arrested and put behind the bars and since then, the new phase in my life started. My, I would say my political involvement, though not party affiliation was never there, but political involvement and political awareness and political concerns, began from that period. Elphinstone College, as I said, was a very, in a way, though elite but yet there were very many nationalist currents in the same college, and so we had lot of student's activism at that time. Actually the principal, when he called the police, there was a lot of protest. Principal cannot call the police in the precincts of an educational institution. The most important or crucial decision time came for me when in the month of November second-term started and I had to decide whether I would be joining the college, paying the fees or not go for the further education, and somehow or the other, I opted for the second. I didn't pay the fees and I said let the year go waste, and according to me, it was not a waste, but for others, definitely and for my future career perhaps it was a little loss but anyway, I didn't join the college. And that is how a young girl of 17 decided to not to continue the college.

### **C.S.Lakshmi: And her decision was accepted by her family?**

Neera: Yes, it was accepted. They said, "Ok fine, if you don't want to join, its okay. It's your decision." But the crucial moment came when I was attending one meeting at Chowpatty. Because that was the meeting where, because Kasturba Gandhi<sup>28</sup> had expired and Gandhiji<sup>29</sup> had undergone fast<sup>30</sup>, so it was in sympathy with Gandhiji that the meeting was called. It was a huge meeting but suddenly the police cordoned everybody and then we were taken to Gamdevi Police Chowky and then, of course, they couldn't, there was no place in the Arthur Road Jail<sup>31</sup> for 1,000 women to be accommodated, so they selected and somehow or the other, I also got selected and put under the bars. I with others nearly 25 of us, we were put behind bars. It was for a brief

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<sup>25</sup> Established in the late nineteenth century; considered the seat of "western" education.

<sup>26</sup> Often referred to as the father of the Indian nation, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948, "Mahatma") led the freedom struggle in India. He was the originator of the non-violent method of struggle called "satyagraha" and the civil disobedience movement. He headed a non-violent movement that finally drove the British out of India on August 15, 1947 and led to the partition of India and Pakistan into two formal countries, with Hindu and Muslim majorities respectively.

<sup>27</sup> On August 8, 1942, the All-India Congress Committee adopted a resolution sanctioning "the starting of mass struggle on non-violent lines on the widest possible scale under the leadership of Gandhi". The committee demanded the complete withdrawal of the British power from India; the "Quit India" resolution was in effect a call for an open revolt against foreign rule.

<sup>28</sup> (1872-1944) Wife of Mahatma Gandhi and an important political figure in her own right.

<sup>29</sup> Gandhi – the "ji" is an Indian suffix used as a mark of respect.

<sup>30</sup> A fast unto death became one powerful way in which Gandhi protested against British rule in the months before India gained independence.

<sup>31</sup> Largest and oldest jail in Bombay/Mumbai. It houses most of the city's prisoners. Its capacity is 804 inmates but is grossly overcrowded.

period no doubt but it was also a very trying period for me and my family. I must give credit to the family also. Because, first of all, my father did [try to] persuade me that if you want to come out, we can do, there are people who can help us. But I said, “No, I didn’t want to. Let the courts decide what is my fate.”

**C.S.Lakshmi: Neeraben, after dropping out for one year, you joined Elphinstone College again. What was the atmosphere like?**

Neera: There were new friends who had come up, who were all taking part in the political movement, but they were influenced by the Left politics and Lohia ideology<sup>32</sup>. So I came in contact with the left group very intimately – we spent a lot of time together in reading, attending study circles and all that and this was also the period when I was considerably influenced by the women leaders during that period, particularly those who were part of the nationalist movement and Left movement for example, Aruna Asaf Ali<sup>33</sup>, she was underground for a long time and I would admire her courage. Similarly, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya<sup>34</sup> also was a very, I would say some sort of heroine for me in terms of the pattern of life she was living and the boldness with which she was staying alone and all that. And on the other hand, I was also admiring the dramatic talents of Harendranath Chattopadhyaya<sup>35</sup> because Left influence was very sharp during that period. But one person who has even till today influenced somewhat I would say, my mental make up is one lady called Pushpa Mehta. Now, she was a very young widow, and she was always wearing [a] black sari, and she had been very much touched by the plight of women—she was also a Congress worker. She later became a minister also—but she was the person who started the first rescue home for women<sup>36</sup> in Ahmedabad. And the way in which she was handling the cases, and the way in which she was sympathetically, and she was for the first time talking about, not criticising the women who were coming out of the house, but giving them shelter and protecting them and making them empowered through education, through earning and other things. What we are talking today, she was experimenting on those lines and I was highly under her influence, the way, the courageous way in which she had been handling the whole problem.

But what I would like to tell you about this phase of my life, the adolescent phase of our life is somehow or the other the total atmosphere, that means our macro atmosphere also of the political

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<sup>32</sup> Ram Manohar Lohia was a socialist scholar who laid foundation of the Congress Socialist Party, founded 1934. He wrote extensively on the feasibility of a socialist India. Lohia formed a new branch in the Indian National Congress—the All India Congress Committee (a foreign affairs department), through which he helped define India's foreign policy. Lohia wanted to abolish private schools and establish upgraded government schools, which would give equal academic opportunity to students of all castes. This, he hoped would help eradicate the divisions created by the caste system.

<sup>33</sup> A veteran freedom fighter who was given the Nehru Award for International understanding for 1991 on August 9, 1992, during the Golden Jubilee celebrations of the Quit India Movement.

<sup>34</sup> A pioneering women’s rights crusader and the leader of the crafts’ movement in India. She became the President of the All India Women’s Conference. She lived an unconventional life, divorcing her husband Harindranath Chattopadhyaya at a time when few women would have dared. After independence, she worked untiringly to save handicrafts and handlooms when Jawaharlal Nehru appointed her as the head of the Handicrafts Board.

<sup>35</sup> An Indian actor and poet, and also the brother of Sarojini Naidu, who served President of the Indian National Congress and was the first woman governor of free India.

<sup>36</sup> Women’s shelter.

upheavals, communal and all those things, as well as the family background, they were somehow or the other affecting my psyche, which may not be perceptible at that time, but which has shaped. Because I would like to say at this point of time that this kind of atmosphere was not possible for my other siblings who followed me. So perhaps they were nurtured in a different – the family was the same, the schools and colleges which where they went were not very different, but – the outside atmosphere had completely changed. And so the consciousness which is coming up, not yet of feminism, but of concern for others, and concern for women, I think was built up because of this complex intermingling of factors.

**C.S.Lakshmi: Neeraben, what about the impact of Gandhi himself on you?**

Neera: Gandhi himself influenced me completely, considerably, I would say, though I would not call myself a Gandhian, but he influenced me considerably in building up values. Though in my book I have evaluated him. I have said that his rigidity in some matters have really somehow or the other affected the Gandhians as well as the movement itself. But – his honesty and his purposiveness of the whole issue and his dedication and his sparkle and candidness – all these things have affected me.

**C.S.Lakshmi: Neeraben, marriage is one area where a feminist has to take many important decisions and in India we also have the system of marriages being arranged by parents. In your case how did it happen?**

Neera: In my case, I had not arranged marriage<sup>37</sup>, but we selected each other and I think it was of course, as you might say that it was a child marriage<sup>38</sup>, actually, because I was just 20 years when I got engaged and 21 years when I got married. But I met my husband in political study circles and over a period of time, we had some exchanges and we decided to marry. Now the fortunate, or one could say that the convenient, part of the entire relationship was that both of us belonged to the same caste. So the opposition for the inter-caste marriage, or inter-communal marriage, that experience we had not to undergo. In the case of my husband, he was ten years older to me, so that was a bit [of a] factor for anxiety, particular on the part of my parents. As far as the match was concerned, as I said, there were fortuitous circumstances that he was coming from a very good, what would one call, cultured family. His father was a very well known litterateur in Gujarati<sup>39</sup> language. It was also a family which was well-known for its cultural activities, for its hospitality, for its gentleness, for its own identity and individuality and so that way there was nothing to complain. As one says, that there were all factors which could be marked as correct, correct, correct. [Laughter]

**C.S.Lakshmi: Did you have a ritualistic kind of marriage?**

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<sup>37</sup> System where parents and family choose one's spouse.

<sup>38</sup> System where children are "married" by parents who perform and take the vows on behalf of the children; the girl is officially sent to her husband's house the day she attains menarche.

<sup>39</sup> Language spoken by the majority in the Western state of Gujarat.

Neera: No, fortunately not...We had the marriage, registration marriage not at the registrar's office, but we had called the registrar [to perform the ceremony] at our house, that is, where Akshay<sup>40</sup> was staying, and some friends were witnesses.

**C.S.Lakshmi: Neeraben, you got married in 1947, and you decided to have a child ten years later, I think Mihir was born in 1957. So was this decision yours or both you and Akshaybhai had decided that you should have a child much later?**

Neera: No, both of us decided, because both of us were very much concerned with our own career. We were also not economically stable; we wanted to have a sort of a firm companionship after which we thought we should have a child. And that was a very, very deliberate decision, and we were able to carry out.

**C.S.Lakshmi: Neeraben, your subject for the M.A. thesis was the impact of British rule<sup>41</sup> on the position of women in Modern India. I don't think that women were the subject for a serious study at this point. How did you choose this for your...?**

Neera: I and my husband discussed what would be really interesting to me and also would somehow contribute to the thinking process and then we came around this topic of studying...because British rule had just ended, so I thought that I should examine the status of women, how was it during the pre-independence period and what were the forces leading to its change or no change etc. That's how. I got a good guide, Dr. Kapadia from the school of economics. He was a sociologist, and he readily accepted me as a student and so that's how I took up the study.

**C.S.Lakshmi: Was it after this that you joined S.N.D.T.<sup>42</sup>? 1954 you joined S.N.D.T. What was the atmosphere like in S.N.D.T.?**

Neera: I must tell you something about the beginning of S.N.D.T. University. S.N.D.T. University was started in 1916 by one very renowned social reformer, who was himself not merely a reformer by say profession or vocation, but he was a practitioner. He dared to marry a widow and it is courageous of widow to decide to marry and D.K. Karve or Maharishi Karve is the founder of the university...and there are three features of the university which Karve persistently kept in his mind. One was that he wanted to take higher education to girls. And those girls who were not able to go into a co-educational institution. And that is how, he established a Women's University. The second feature, was that it was that the entire teaching had to be in the regional language, and regional languages at that time were Gujarati and Marathi<sup>43</sup>, and later on Hindi<sup>44</sup> was also added. But Gujarati and Marathi were the two languages in which the entire

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<sup>40</sup> Neera Desai's husband.

<sup>41</sup> The British ruled from 1858-1947.

<sup>42</sup> Shreemati Nathibhai Damodar Thackersey, a women's university in Bombay.

<sup>43</sup> Language spoken by the majority in the state of Maharashtra.

<sup>44</sup> Language spoken by the majority of Indians in the north (at a little over 40%), adopted as the official language of India.

teaching, even up to post-graduation, was done. And that was pioneering work. The third feature of the university which he also kept in mind, was that many girls come from lower class families, lower-caste families, they may not get the opportunity of coming to the college so he created a facility of paying privately.

**C.S.Lakshmi: Neeraben, 1966 was the Golden Jubilee<sup>45</sup> year of S.N.D.T. It was a very memorable year for the University. You were in the University from '54 onwards. So how did you participate in this Golden Jubilee celebration?**

Neera: We were some four or five persons in the university who were all working towards women's education and I wouldn't say that all of them were feminists but we had the same cause in our mind. And when we were deciding to have a pattern of celebration of the Golden Jubilee, we said that at the launching of the Golden Jubilee, we will have an exhibition, and that exhibition was to be on Indian Women's March towards freedom. And the closing function was to be the publication of Golden Jubilee volume. Now in both these events, I took very active part and I think that I grew during the entire process. My concept about the women's position, various forces determining the women's status etc., were being crystallised. Not crystallised completely, but were being crystallised at that time. And when the book was released, Zakir Hussain<sup>46</sup> was the President and he came and it was a very, very memorable occasion for the university because for the first time, such a voluminous material on women's education had been brought out by a women's university and I was part of that experiment, I treasure it like anything.

**C.S.Lakshmi: Neeraben, you spoke about your thesis. You also spoke about S.N.D.T. University, Now since we are on this issue, I would like to know whether the women's movement in India was a movement that was parallel to the national movement?**

Neera: I would say, yes and no, because the main organisation which spearheaded women's issues was All-India Women's Conference, which was established in 1927. Now, it was very paradoxical that [it was] initiated by the colonial administrator in the sense that he said, "Why don't you ask for education? Women should ask for more education for women," and that's how the organisation started. It was blessed by the Maharanis<sup>47</sup> and upper-caste Hindu<sup>48</sup> women at that time – most of them were Hindu – but slowly it passed into the hands of women who were very actively participating in the freedom movement. And so the organisation which was started with saying that we will have nothing to do with politics, slowly got from education to social legislation, to political reforms and to Hindu Code Bill<sup>49</sup>, which itself was a political issue and which became (remains) till today a political issue. So that way, the women's movement was a part of the nationalist struggle. Those women who were active in both the organisations – Indian National Congress, or even CPI Communist Party of India – they were there and in All India

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<sup>45</sup> 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

<sup>46</sup> A musician.

<sup>47</sup> A Maharani is an Indian princess or elite Indian woman.

<sup>48</sup> Polytheistic, codified religious and philosophical system, India's largest religious group.

<sup>49</sup> While a common criminal code exists for every Indian citizen, areas of marriage, inheritance, divorce etc. are governed by separate personal laws for Muslims, Christians, and Hindus, which are based on the distinct religious tenets and customs of each group. The Hindu Code Bill attempted to codify the various Hindu civil laws under a single nomenclature. It was passed in 1956 after much opposition.

Women's Conference, they were more or less the same. And so that kind of interchange and inter-exchange between nationalism and the gender issues was going on. And there were occasions, definitely, where the political leaders, stalwarts like Gandhiji and Jawaharlal Nehru<sup>50</sup>, were saying that right now the gender question is not important but today, the more important item on the agenda is freedom for the country. And, it was here that some of the women had to, like Amrit Kaur<sup>51</sup>, like Kamaladevi had to say that, "No, for us, these are the important issues also." And they were somehow or the other trying to build up the bridge and trying to, I think, inadvertently, influence the political leaders to willy-nilly take up the gender issue, which was very much highlighted and which had a very, according to me, a very important role when the National Planning Commission was appointed in the '40s. Jawaharlal Nehru was the President and K.T. Shah<sup>52</sup> was one of the important personnel. They had a separate section of National Commission on Women's Role in Planned Economy, which was the first official statement which was being prepared where women's issues – not merely legal, social, educational, but economic issues and her economic empowerment – were also on agenda. So, to that extent I would say that at times they were running parallelly, at times they were crossing with each other, at times they were supporting each other, so all these cross currents were going on.

**C.S.Lakshmi: What about the term "feminism" itself? Because I'm asking because when you published your book *Women in Modern India*, you asked one of the women you admired most – Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay – to write the introduction. And in one part of the introduction, she says that this book is wonderful and she has done very good work, but she says that the stand she is taking is a feminist stand. So I want to know how the term 'feminist' was understood at this time.**

Neera: Lakshmi, it's good, because I was from the beginning expecting that you should ask me this question since this has been the, I think bothering many people as to how this term "feminism" was used and how it came in my book and if you ask me, I would definitely say that when in 1957 that book was out and Kamaladevi wrote a beautiful introduction but with this proviso about feminism, and she labelled me as a feminist which I think I consider it as a very great tribute rather than a criticism. You see, Kamaladevi was allergic to the term "feminism," not after the '50s, but even in the '40s she was allergic to the term, and she has categorically stated it elsewhere that, "We are not like feminists of the West, we are not anti-men, we are struggling for women's rights, but we want men and women to go together", but her other argument, and I think that although some of those leftists who were allergic to the word "feminism" was more because for them, economic independence, or economic equality, was prior to gender equality. And so, for Marxism also, the destruction of capitalism was more important than destruction of gender inequality. And so for them, to emphasize these gender questions while this whole struggle for economic independence, national independence, is going on, was, I think, diverting the whole history and that is how they were very much opposed to feminist movement. Because feminist movement was highlighting the gender inequality. And I would say that the gender inequality at that time was not as sharply challenged as it was in the '70s. Actually, it was in the liberal framework which they were challenging and they just wanted the equal rights with men. They never challenged "Why this?" or they never asked this question. The movement had never

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<sup>50</sup> The first Prime Minister of independent India.

<sup>51</sup> The first woman to hold a post in the cabinet as Minister in 1947.

<sup>52</sup> A socialist economist.

asked this question at that time that what is the root of inequality? They have been always talking like liberals about because men and women are equal, because men have more rights, more opportunities to develop, we should have also the same and this is how the liberal framework and liberal feminism looked at the issue. Along with Kamaladevi, because one of the first statements came in the book called *Our Cause* edited by Shyamkumari Nehru in the late '40s, and there she has written one special article on Women's Movement in India at that particular [time]... and she is, she has categorically mentioned, Amrit Kaur also categorically mentions – many of them – Sarojini Naidu<sup>53</sup> categorically mentions that we have nothing to do with feminism. In spite of the fact that they were, while raising the women's issue, they were being challenged by the men.

**C.S.Lakshmi: Can I end this session, or let us say sum it up by saying that the discussion about patriarchy and other things came later because you said that it is within the liberal framework, so the discussion on patriarchy, and the entire issue of patriarchy came much afterwards. Would that be right?**

Neera: I think so, I think so.

**C.S.Lakshmi: Neeraben, you said that the SNDT University since it was a new University, was open to new ideas and experiments. How did they get the idea to start the Research Unit on Women's Studies?**

Neera: One of the important events for the university, which happened after the Golden Jubilee was the event when they were celebrating the centenary celebrations of the donor, Vithaldas Thackersey, and as a part of the celebrations, they, we had planned actually to have a round table on what should be the future of a women's university. Because in '16 it was okay to have a women's university. To continue for 60 years, it was fine, because still the demand was there for the girls to stay, learn in a separate institution. But in the '70s or the late '60s, what was the rationale for continuing the women's university only open to women and there was a lot of discussion on that day. Many educationists, many political workers, many academicians had come, and one thing they said, that you cannot close the university, that means you cannot have men enter, it has to be retained as a women's university, but the stance has to change. The other thing which happened at that time which was also a very, one would say, a contributory cause in developing this kind of a ideology, was that Prof. Nurul Hasan, who was an Education Minister at that time, came to give convocation address and in the convocation address he said that S.N.D.T. has served its purpose very well, and now S.N.D.T. should go in for research and action. That was also the suggestion given by Nurul Hasan. And in all this atmosphere of giving a new direction to the university, accidentally an opportunity came in 1974, March when... a very meagre, to this day it is a very meagre funding which came, and it was suggested that we should use it for researches on women and that is how on the 2<sup>nd</sup> July, 1974, Research Centre for Women's Studies<sup>54</sup> was started and I became the first director of that centre. The term came

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<sup>53</sup> An eminent poet and one among the most visible leaders of pre-Independent India. She was the President of the Indian National Congress and the first woman governor of free India.

<sup>54</sup> Established in 1974; has pioneered the introduction of Women's Studies in the Indian University system; carries out research, teaching and outreach programs in Women's Studies.

much later. We called it to Research Unit. Because even somebody could ask me – why did you call it Women’s Studies at that time? Because what do you mean by Women’s Studies or what was the meaning of Women’s Studies at that time? So I have no answer, I have really no answer how this term we used, but it was a very common terminology in the West, and perhaps those influences which were coming, 1975 was also on the threshold – International Women’s Year and all that, but we called it Research Centre—Unit—on Women’s Studies and after the UGC<sup>55</sup>— after more than ten years – the UGC accepted it or legitimised its existence, we changed the nomenclature into Research Centre on Women’s Studies.

**C.S.Lakshmi: Neeraben, you have been writing a lot and speaking a lot about Women’s Studies being a subject that is not purely theoretical. The understanding of Women’s Studies has to come linked with action. I want to know whether this was a position taken by the Research Centre which was really your position because you started it or was it the position taken by all Women’s Studies centres?**

Neera: Lakshmi, the link with the action has been one of the important, I would say, features of Indian Women’s Studies. The Western concept has always been, from the beginning, more theoretical, because they started with *teaching* Women’s Studies. We have come to *teaching* Women’s Studies at a much later date. Even in the 1981 conference<sup>56</sup> -- the first conference on Women’s Studies -- which we held in the city of Bombay, at SNDT University, as far as the aims of Women’s Studies were concerned, we have said that it is research, action and teaching. At least Research Centre on Women’s Studies and myself and some others, our colleagues particularly of my generation, we have always been feeling that Women’s Studies has to be linked with action because without knowing the pulse of the situation, you cannot merely theoretically understand the subject or understand the problem. It is not merely the study – we are not merely interested in theoretical understanding of the position, but we want to change the structure, change the system, change the laws and whatever it may be coming in the way of women’s status, and that is where I think, action comes. And it is at this point, I would say, that it comes in violent conflict with the mainstream subjects. Because they are, as I told you earlier also, that they state that social sciences have to be value-free. Now value-free means, because when you say that you have to change, then you have to have some values – change for what? Change of what? Change where? Now, all these things have to come if you accept that there is some concept, there is something in your mind, to which you want to goad all the action. And it is there I think, that the action component is very important for Women’s Studies.

**C.S.Lakshmi: Neeraben, a linked question that I would like to ask is that when you speak very often and when you write, you use Women’s Studies perspective and feminist perspective alternately. For you, there’s no difference. But I think that this is not the case with Women’s Studies centres all over India. For you Women’s Studies has always stood for feminist perspective. This feminist perspective must have evolved over the years with exchanges from various scholars all over the world. Can you tell us about this, the journey of acquiring perspective?**

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<sup>55</sup> The University Grants Commission is a statutory body of the Government of India, which is responsible for the coordination, determination and maintenance of standards of university education in India. It allocates public funds to the central universities and other universities and institutions of higher learning.

<sup>56</sup> National Conference on Women’s Studies held in Bombay.

Neera: Surely, because, as you rightly say, I use the term alternatively, depending upon the context, and the perspective, whatever we might call it – Women’s Studies’ perspective or feminist perspective – which I have derived has been over a period of time. And one of the books which had influenced me at that time was by Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein on women’s two roles in society<sup>57</sup>. Because for the first time this question, of middle class women coming into the arena of work, and therefore the problem of conflict and adjustment and everything was being highlighted. And from that perspective slowly I was developing this whole idea, and whole notion, that women’s status has been affected by the patriarchal society structure and how, and to this concept, to come, I have travelled a long journey. And not that these terms were unfamiliar to me, because in anthropology, we do study patriarchy, and patriliney and matriliney and all that but in this adequate perspective, it came to me over a period of time, and in this, many experiences which I had undergone, helped, and one of the important exposures which I had was during three years – that is ’77, ’78, and ’79, to ’80, when I attended various conferences abroad and came in contact with the feminists who were looking at the issue from the whole question of patriarchy and capitalism, both. And that is how I was exposed to liberal feminists, the radical feminists and the socialist feminists.

So this was the exposure which I got, and through these exposures and then, before that, there was one experience which I had in our country that in ’75, which was in a way, the year of Emergency<sup>58</sup> and in that year there was a conference in October, at Pune<sup>59</sup>, organised by Gail Omvedt<sup>60</sup> and others, of women of more oppressed categories – and of course, others had also come, but for the first time to attend such a gathering where prostitutes would also be there, where students will be also there, where teachers would be there, where political activists would be there, it was also a very great experience for me.

**C.S.Lakshmi: Neeraben, could you tell us about the action programme that the research centre has done so far?**

Neera: Research Centre started in ’74 and within 2 years, because we, as I said to you, we were always thinking of doing action. And the major action programme started in ’77-’78 and that was in an area South of Bombay, 180 kilometres. away, which is called Udwada. And we took first seven Villages in Udwada, and there, first we had the survey of that region to find out what are their needs, and what are their demands for change. And then, it was a beginning of the programme. And later on, the entire programme was built up on empowering and conscientising women, particularly the lower-caste women to their situation. But the more important question

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<sup>57</sup> This book is called *Women’s Two Roles: Home and Work*, and was published in 1956.

<sup>58</sup> On June 21, 1975, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was found guilty of election fraud by the Indian High Court. She was ordered to leave her seat in Parliament and banned from running for an additional six years. Instead, Indira Gandhi declared a State of Emergency, and in her own words brought democracy "to a grinding halt". Invoking article 352 of the Indian Constitution, she granted herself extraordinary powers and launched a massive crackdown on civil liberties and political opposition. Indira's emergency rule lasted nineteen months, when Indira Gandhi suddenly announced the next general election in March, and released her opponents from prison. The emergency was not revoked until March 23, 1977.

<sup>59</sup> A city in the Indian state of Maharashtra.

<sup>60</sup> Born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Gail Omvedt has been a citizen of India since 1982. She is a scholar-activist, working with new social movements, in particular women's groups and farmer's organizations.

was of making them aware of the situation. So we had various programmes – training programmes, seminars and group discussions and training programmes to make women aware. Starting from seven to nine villages, today the coverage is to more than 50 villages. And craft centre and many things have come up there. But I would also like to emphasize that when we accepted the basic philosophy that action has to be the part of our consciousness raising and our understanding of women's status, action also means supporting other's action, and supporting and also participating in those activities which have been undertaken by other women's groups to change society. And this is how I personally, and the centre, came into close contact with the activist groups of those period, which might be still continuing. And it is as a part of this only, I have been attending most of the activist conferences which have been held in the country. I have been benefiting. That doesn't mean I agree with everything they are saying, or, I share their way of analysis of everything or share their method of solving the problem, but I do share with them the sensitiveness and the concern they are showing towards the women's issues. We started Women's Studies by saying that we are going to speak their language, we are going to speak poor women's language, or the language which they would understand, the idiom which they would understand, but today what we are speaking is something which even we don't understand. So what has happened to the praxis? And this is a very big dilemma which is going on in my mind, but that doesn't mean that I have lost faith in the action part.... My firm belief is that you cannot segregate theory from practise. Both of them go together, and somehow or the other, the centre or the scholar has to exhibit or manifest that there is concern for both. Because merely talking about action, I don't think has any value.

**C.S.Lakshmi: Neeraben, from your experiences of interaction with women of various levels you must have come across many interesting happenings and experiences. Could you tell us about them?**

Neera: You see, one of my students became a widow. Now, my student becoming a widow means she was not even 20 years old. So, I went to her house with some of my students. When I went there, I had expected that she would be very much, that she might not be seen also in the room, she might be sitting in some corner and still I see her decked in ornaments and beautiful zari<sup>61</sup> sari<sup>62</sup> and all that. And I got the shock of my life. When I asked one of my students, how is it then that she is dressed like this, and they said that the custom of the caste is that for ten days, till it is supposed that the body – the soul –, remains in the area, she will be behaving as if she is the wife of that person. But after that, she will be widow. And so, the tragedy and the contradiction of the entire situation came to my mind that when a person is in a state of mind when one is not thinking about ornaments or dress or zari or whatever it may be, you make her wear. And then after some time, you completely see that she doesn't touch those things or doesn't think about those things. Now what kind of social system is it? It is absolutely insensitive to women's feelings and women's mind, what she must be undergoing. You presume that she doesn't have any feeling or she doesn't have any thought. So this was one very shocking experience, which I had. Another eye-opener was when I was working in the slum area. And when some women, one of the women was beaten by her husband and who was drunk and all

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<sup>61</sup> A very elaborate sari with gold thread embroidery on it, usually worn at weddings.

<sup>62</sup> A sari is a 6-9 feet long material that many Indian women drape around themselves—together with the *salwaar kameez*, the most popular Indian women's clothing.

that, then she was telling me that, “Yesterday he had beaten me and these are the scars and all that.” I said that you are living in a community and a neighbourhood where you can leave your husband – all these inhibitions and taboos are for our middle class people, where we cannot leave the battering situation. But you can. Why are you not going out and just throwing him away or just leave the situation? And then she told me that “No, we know we cannot bear the situation, but madam, when we stay in the house, we are facing one wolf, but when we will go out we will have to face 100 wolves.” So they are aware of the reality, that there are people who are ready to pounce upon them, and so this is a negotiation, this is a decision which they have consciously made. And the last experience, which I have been, so to say, exposed in a very different way, and that has also touched my psyche so much, I must say. This was when I was doing one research field study with one activist – very good activist, very sensitive activist and very live – perhaps you might be knowing her – Shiraz Balsara.

**C.S.Lakshmi: Yes, you did the caste study with her.**

Neera: Yes, caste study – So Shiraz and I were going in a village where the woman was belonging to the Nayaka community – the lower-caste – and she, her husband was so torturing her, so battering her, and she was the mainstay of the family, she was earning. And then what happened, one day, the husband also tried to poison her. Meanwhile, she developed a relationship with a poojari<sup>63</sup> and that poojari was very sympathetic to her and that must have upset the husband. And husband wanted to marry somebody, but that for him was okay, but his wife going with the poojari was not tolerated. So suddenly she left her home and the poojari helped her, somehow or the other. Then they had the caste council, the tribal council, where the divorce had to be given, because she asked for separation, she said that “I don’t want to stay with this man who is a danger to my existence itself.” So, in this situation, which is very, very eye-opening, when the *Panch*, that is the main person, he asked her as to, “What are you going to do?” She said, “My husband purchased my body with 500 rupees.<sup>64</sup> I am returning those 500 rupees and I am reclaiming my body.”

**C.S.Lakshmi: Neeraben, whenever we talk of the ’80s, we always talk of them as ’80s – “the vehicle of hope” but many young people ask me, “So what happened in the ’80s that you people talk about hope?” Because they are facing the hard realities of today. So what do you think are the events that made us hopeful in the ’80s?**

Neera: You see, I think mid-’70s, the women’s movement started. According to some it was the second phase of the Indian women’s movement, or the third phase of the Indian women’s movement. But after the ’70s, the movement became very, very loud, in the sense, visible. And there was also a lot of visibility in terms of action both in the court of law, in the legislature, and, on the street. There was Mathura rape case<sup>65</sup>, there were dowry deaths and our struggles against

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<sup>63</sup> A priest.

<sup>64</sup> Currency of India. As of 03/08/05 roughly 43 rupees=\$1USD.

<sup>65</sup> The story of Mathura, a 16-year-old tribal girl who was raped by two policemen, became the impetus for reform in India’s rape laws. A court acquitted the accused, stating that Mathura had eloped with her lover and that as she was “habituated to sexual intercourse,” the policemen could not have raped her. It further ruled that Mathura was a liar and that intercourse had occurred with her consent. But a high court convicted the accused, saying that mere surrender did not mean consent. However, the Supreme Court set aside the high court judgement and acquitted the

dowry<sup>66</sup>, there was the problem of, and the whole issue of female foetus being killed, there was the issue of media projection and lot of protests against the media projection of women. Even in literature, and even in the classrooms, many of these questions were being raised. Actually, two events were happening simultaneously also, of solidarity. One was the organisation of the Women's Studies, which was started actually in 1981, and every two years we had the conference on Women's Studies. And if we look at the agenda of the conference, if you look at the issues which were taken up by the conference from '81 onwards, we will be feeling that the academia interested in Women's Studies has been really questioning the subordination, or the gender question. And this gender question was asked not merely in terms of family surroundings, but in terms of the wider society, the macro society. Similarly, there were conferences held by the autonomous women's groups also, and they were also raising all these questions of violence, of the way in which solidarity has to be built up, how do we survive. Then they were also asking the questions like lesbianism, like single mothers, like problems of survival in patriarchal hegemonic society – so all these questions were being asked and all these questions were asked at both the levels, so there was all round atmosphere of activity, all round atmosphere of not only discussion, but action going on. And today, many times I think there is some reason and some justification for feeling that that fervour, that kind of enthusiasm, and that kind of just spending one's life for a cause, is gone, or is not visible.

**C.S.Lakshmi: Do you think it's because the '90s have been disturbing, in terms of various events that have occurred?**

Neera: Because what is really happening is that – actually the 90s were the watershed in a way – various problems came up – both at the theoretical level, and at the action level. Theoretical level, the issues were like “dominance of culture”, and in the perception of the Women's Studies scholars, and so what happened, that with the coming of post-modernist thinking also, the whole emphasis was laid on difference rather than solidarity. It is the whole concept of difference which started in the conference, at Calcutta conference I must say, when for the first time this issue was raised – who speaks for whom and can we speak for everybody? – Can a Hindu woman speak for all the women, or all women have to speak in their own voices. Now these are the issues which have come up. At times they are real, but at times they are, according to me, exaggerated. Because it is not always necessary for an individual to experience exploitation – we can imagine also the suffering of the exploitation. So similarly one can speak for “the others”. Now, how much one is speaking how much one is – these are all the problems. So this was one issue which was coming up, and which has been dominating the Women's Studies scholars for a long time, and there is a section who has been influenced. And on the other hand, the divide is of communalism and which is taking a violent form. It requires a great mental courage and mental strength to say that in spite of this we are one because we are all exploited. We are all suffering,

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policemen. That court ruled that Mathura had raised no alarm, there were no visible injuries on her body and hence her allegations of rape were untrue. The judgement outraged women's groups and triggered a major campaign for changes in rape laws.

<sup>66</sup> Dowry is a kind of payment made in cash and kind to the bridegroom's family by the bride's parents at the time of the marriage. The brides' family's inability to satisfy the demands of bridegrooms' families started the phenomenon of dowry harassment, violence and consequent deaths (murders) of brides at the hands of their in-laws. The movement against dowry in India began around 1977 when dowry deaths started being reported. It began in North India, and gradually women's organizations from all around the country joined the movement.

whether we are Hindu, Muslim, Christian, whatever, or whether we belong to it may be upper caste, lower caste, middle class, intermediary caste or tribal. Because all these people are today, all these differences are being utilised by the ruling groups. And to some extent we fall prey to all these divisive factors.

**C.S.Lakshmi: Neeraben, you have spoken at length about the past and the contemporary reality of the existence of women and the kind of stands that feminists have taken over the years. But I know that you have also spoken about an emerging new solidarity'. As a feminist, how do you see this new solidarity emerging, from what quarters, from what areas of our experience is this new solidarity going to arise?**

Neera: I think that the new solidarity – I see glimpses of solidarity coming up and consciousness being raised, the group actions being taken at various situations. I have seen solidarity being built up in fighting communalism. Particularly I have some experience and some information on the Gujarat riots<sup>67</sup>, and I know that there are young women and even younger girls who have been taking part in the rescue operations, in relief operations, and they are looking at the problem not from the communal divide, but communal harmony. My own feeling is, and my own gut understanding is that – because this I also saw during the earth-quake; the way in which young groups – I myself had gone there so I could witness young groups, and both boys and girls taking part in the entire rehabilitation, re-building of the Kutch<sup>68</sup> area. And so, I personally think that we cannot afford to lose hope. We have to have hope in the goodness of the human beings, in the need that everybody will have to survive to get – however the problems which are coming up. Because human rights has been right now one area where all the groups are combining.

My own feminism – I would definitely like to say something and end up the entire discourse, is that I understand feminism in one way as a struggle against exploitation. But this is exploitation of the gender. And it is overthrowing patriarchy and building up a society which will be free of the oppression. But my, also, feminism tells me, somehow or the other, because of my upbringing, because of my middle-class background, or whatever it may be, that – and that is my personality also – that one need not be assertive, one need not be very loud in one's behaviour and yet one can be firm in one's viewpoint. And that has made some people doubt whether because of my exteriority, because I wear a sari which is a very traditional type, I do not cut my hair, I do not have short hair, I do not wear the modern dresses, and I do not perhaps smoke also or drink, I may not be as feminist. But I don't know, for me, these are the exteriors – some people may have those exteriors with them. I have my own values, I have my own behaviour pattern, and I have my own ways of expressing my concern for the solidarity of women, and my belief in solidarity and my belief in the younger generation is very, very firm and very solid.

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<sup>67</sup> The Gujarat riots started after 59 Hindus were killed when some people set fire to a train carrying Hindu pilgrims in February 2002. That attack was blamed on a Muslim mob. In the ensuing reaction to these deaths, Hindu mobs killed nearly 1,000 people, mainly Muslims. Unofficial figures put the death toll at 2,000, but more than twice this number were displaced. Many Muslim women were gang-raped. The worst riots since the Babri Masjid riots a decade ago, the Gujarat riots paralysed the city of Ahmedabad.

<sup>68</sup> On January 26, 2001, an earthquake devastated the landscape and lives of the people of Kutch Desert in the Indian state of Gujarat.

*The End*

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