

Global Feminisms Site-Specific Thematic Films India

Narrator

The Global Feminisms Project brought with it the challenge of covering an entire history of scholarship and action. The challenge for Sparrow was to do it in a way that would map in a nuanced comprehensive manner the various aspects of scholarship and the various kinds of action that women have been involved in. Here at Sparrow we felt we needed to make at least 100 films to document every bit of action and every idea that has emerged from among women's studies scholars. However, ten films, we felt, was something to begin with. The things that we wanted to project were those that emerged from the women's movement and the issues that it threw up. For instance, there was a need felt within the movement to go back to the history of the freedom struggle and to explore the nature of women's participation in it. Also, an entirely new discipline of academic study centered around women's lives came into being only because of the women's movement. The movement also led to all kinds of action in crucial areas of concern, such as violence, health, environment, community development, media and so on. All kinds of efforts were made to increase awareness about women's legal rights. And there was the more direct action in the form of legal aid, advocacy and other modes of redress of grievances. And of course, apart from all this was the politics of the every day that revolved around issues of gender, identity, caste, religion and the politics of expression. All the films in different ways connect with the women's movement and with the ideology of feminism. The things that we wanted to present had to not only cover a wide range of issues, but also represent different regions and grapple with different languages. As far as the presentation of the themes was concerned we were very clear right from the beginning that we didn't want to deal with the issues in a disembodied or merely academic manner. These issues had to be linked complexly to the personal lives of these women as they elaborated on themes or shared certain experiences from their lives. We were also sure that the films would not eschew emotion or keep away from the positions that these women take in their personal lives or in their fields of action. This is because we believe that that originally feminists' slogan of the personal being the political still continues to have validity. This then was the ground plan we had.

The first two films deal with two pioneers in women's studies. The film on Neera Desai deals with the freedom movement years during which she grew up. The growth of her political consciousness, her work in the field of women's studies as also her views on the contemporary moment where we are confronted by troubling issues of communalism and fundamentalisms of various kinds. The film on Vina Mazumdar, another pioneer in the field of women studies, speaks about her innate rebelliousness, her commitment to higher education and learning and teaching, as well as her experience as being part of the group that drafted that first seminal and comprehensive report on the status of women in independent India, the report that we call "Towards Equality." She also shares with us the experience of establishing the Center for Women's Development Studies and speaks about the complexities involved in working close to the power center.

Interview Excerpt

Neera Desai: 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.

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 crystallized. Not crystallized completely, but were being crystallized at that time.

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 – 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.

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.

Vina Mazumdar: There was a seminar using all those documents which had been put together in the Planning Commission or in the Agriculture Ministry, and the outcome of that seminar – they summoned Dr. Swaminathan to the afternoon session. So Swaminathan came. The Press was very well represented, it was a sight – Aruna Asaf Ali standing with her white hair flying, “Swaminathan, how dare you? How dare you reject all these ideas? They had been recommended by official committees constituted by the Government of India. How dare you throw them into the waste paper basket? We will not have it!” It was a fantastic sight. That's the inception of the Seven Sisters.

Interviewer: Vinadi, we have come a long way from the 'Towards Equality' report and a lot many things have happened since then. What do you think of the women's movement in India at this point of time?

Mazumdar: I would say that like many other efforts from the people's side, the movement has taken some beating through the '90s, but its grassroots base has, in fact, expanded from the same '90s. The same causes have produced both the effects. Some fragmentation of organisations, some jargonisation - impact of globalised terminology

entering Women's Studies. But the same process is strengthening the expansion of the grassroots base.

Narrator

The film on Flavia Agnes brings up the very important issue of minority identity and the women's movement and also the need to fight for legal rights. The film details the working of organizations such as The Forum Against the Oppression of Women and it takes us through Flavia's own personal journey, from a situation of terrible domestic violence to one where she is today considered an authority on laws for women.

Interview Excerpt

Flavia Agnes: Forum Against Oppression of Women was a campaign group. We would take up an issue, take up a demonstration, the issue would be in this newspapers etc. But the composition of the Forum would change constantly. That means there is no membership, no structure — anybody could come, anybody could not come. We were into the mode of structurelessness of the Women's Movement of that time. So we were against any kind of structure, creation of any structure, official positions etc.

According to me, the movement had had in a way slotted me as against the norm. The norm was mainstream Hindu academician. And I was the other — the minority the Christian, activist woman.

Interviewer: What is the last word on Uniform Civil Code?

Agnes: Well when I spoke in 1991, I was making a new kind of statement. Unfortunately, the political events of the last decade or so have proved me right. First, the demolition of the Babri Masjid, the attacks on Christian community in Dang, the attacks on Christian missionaries in various places and lastly the Gujarat carnage. Whoever, whichever feminist could hold onto the claim of Uniform Civil Code until now, after Gujarat, everybody had to change their stand. (...) Today, gradually, the whole edifice of so-called Uniform Civil Code has crumbled down as far as women's rights groups are concerned, as far as feminist groups are concerned. Where it remains is in the communal

segments. So today, anybody supporting this demand has to be not a person from women's rights but invariably would be a communal person.

And I think my struggle has been in this direction of creating feminist lawyering in courts at a small level -- district, town, trial courts or even beyond it, local dalits, at panchayats¹⁰¹ etc. that's where women's rights are located. They are not in Delhi, they are not in parliament, they are not in commissions which bring in new statutes.

Narrator

With the films on Mangai and Mahasweta Devi we venture into the area of women's creative expression. The themes are several, such as the spaces available for women within theatrical traditions, the relationship of art and politics, the manner in which women become characters in fiction, and many more. Both Mangai and Mahasweta Devi bring to their fields of expression their experience as activists. For instance, Mahasweta's work with tribals, is very well known in India. Really the films are about the complex dialectics between women's activism and women's expression.

Interview Excerpt

Mahasweta Devi: But the tribal people I found fantastic. They came under... there were some tribals who had been converted and were Christians — they lived separate but all of them were together because they were forest workers and did the same thing, not many households where they could work, they worked some... Delightful people. You remember my story *Hunt* — Mary I found there.

Interviewer: So Mahaswetadi, you discovered the tribals when you went to Mckluskiegunge but how did you get so pulled into their life and how did they become — a their cause become — so important?

Devi: You see, that way I have been to many places because you will find my writings like Dhoulis and others — on people who are not tribals also, but poor village people. I would go anywhere, you know. I had this madness in me. I would walk to their houses,

be very well received. Sit with them, talk. Often sleep in their houses, then come. I just like, loved it. But at that time, I was not thinking of writing anything on them. You might say I went to learn from them, not to teach them anything. Because I found them absolutely scientific, absolutely sophisticated, behaviour and everything, very much.

I try to write about the entire class. Class-wise they are exploited. Men, women, children, all. Women's issues are marginalized. Women suffer more because they have a body. But also, women suffering peculiarly, it's continuing for thousands of years. It starts from home, it starts outside, when she is an adolescent, when she is just growing up. Do you not read in the newspapers? A seven-year child is gang raped. Girls. Only yesterday I read that a girlchild was born and she was a new-born child, was left on the roads of Howrah, things like that. It's a continuous process. (...) You remember the story *Chinta*? *Chinta* had to pay such a price. She had to sell both her daughters. She had to pay such a price because she had after being widowed, she lived with another man. That's why. These things happen even in their society. Man goes and marries another girl, brings her home, nothing. In their society also. Their society is also very, very cruel against women. About the tribals, I will not say so. Tribal society is entirely different. Girl child is very welcome. No difference between a boy and a girl. The entire attitude is different, why different — it must be something which has been going on for thousands of years — they are carrying it in, they are carrying it in themselves. And this had to be written, that's why, I wrote. And also I have seen such women.

Mangai: We had this Shakti Cultural - we called ourselves Shakti Cultural Group of AIDWA. So, we had to do this play. There was that military rape in Tripura. I am talking about '85, '86 and when we did that play, one major concern that we had was that we are talking about rape. But we don't want to show the violence of rape in a physical sense because I don't think rape is just violence.

Excerpt enacted from the book "We Were Making History" by K. Lalitha and Susie Tharu:

When the struggle was over, what are we to do with the women was the question.

Hmmm. They said the unmarried women should go back and marry. The married women

should go back to their families. The men should study law. They thought we can't be party organisers or area commanders. So they asked us to set ourselves right. We had never thought of clinging on to families, husband our children. Huh. Go back and marry? Marry whom? Which guy will have the guts to marry these women? There are so many Ailammas. They were so many women. Their lives have gone without a trace. We wanted to write our history? Who can do it. Only we can do it? We, who were part of that. But, we never had the resources. Not Ailamma, not Satyavathi, not me. It's because we couldn't write, it has come to you. We were making history.

Narrator

The next two films on D. Sharifa and Shahjehan Aapa explore several layers in personal struggles that evolve into more generalized commitments to women's issues. They take up the problems of women's identity and gender within particular communities and the different ways of dealing with these problems. What both the films highlight is the need to scrupulously contextualize women's struggles. For instance the support that one gets from one's family, the support that one gets from one's community, one's marital status, all these are factors that critically impact women's struggles. These two films also take up the issue of violence and the status of women within the family and deal with these issues from entirely different points of view. Sharifa has set up an organization called STEPS in Pudukottai, Tamilnadu. This is an organization that takes up women's issues and offers assistance and advocacy. Very similar work is done by Shakti Shalini, the organization started by Aapa in Delhi. These two films document the working of these organizations, particularly Sharifa's path breaking struggle to build a Mosque for women.

Interview Excerpts

Interviewer: But Aapa, you were a woman who wore burqa. You had never stepped out of the house; then how did you turn into a lioness?

Shahjehan Aapa: I have to tell you that when I first became conscious, I felt that I should not wear the burqa and move out. I felt that I wouldn't be able to do my work properly if I did not remove my burqa because some people will identify with me and

some won't. But if I remove my burqa then everyone will be able to identify with me and so I removed my burqa. People in my house were the first ones to oppose me. They asked me why I removed my burqa, have I become shameless, didn't I feel anything? But I could have had feelings only if there was some humanity among human beings. I was constantly confronting wolves. To fight with these lions I had to become a lioness. From a lamb I became a lioness and I gathered all my strength and kept working. Even now I'm not scared of anyone. You should have a lot of courage to do anything. Balancing your consciousness and enthusiasm gets your work done. This is the way I have always worked.

Interviewer: Aapa, tell us something about Shakti Shalini, you have been there from the very beginning. When was it started, how many people are there today, what kind of work are you doing?

Shahjehan Aapa: Shakti Shalini was established nearly eighteen to nineteen years ago and both of us – myself and Satyarani – have been associated with it from the very beginning. Both of us are working together. But the other people who worked earlier some of them couldn't do this work and left and today we have a staff of thirteen people. We are going to complete eighteen years and are stepping in the nineteenth year and the working methodology has been that we offer counseling, do follow up of other cases, girls whose cases are not being accepted anywhere, we take those up and if there is a girl who is harassed by her family, by the society or is a rape victim we have a shelter home for them in Shakti Shalini. They stay over there.

At the end of it all, one day people will come and put me away, but the best thing is, many discussions will arise. People will say this woman has raised so many different issues. If ten people praise then others will criticize. I won't feel bad about it at all. I accept that and I am thankful that this women's movement began and that I was a part of it. And most of all I am very happy and I am with everyone in this happiness.

D. Sharifa: Our overall work is to work for women. A woman must get social recognition. Whether the problems arise from being Dalits, or of a particular religion, or social or family problems, we look at them from the women's angle. We have done a lot of work for the Dalits.

Interviewer: That means that you don't look upon the mosque just as a place of worship?

D. Sharifa: No, it is not a place of worship alone. You can see a 60 year old man sleeping in a mosque or a temple. Where will a woman go to stretch herself, just to relax? To talk about oneself, to do things, such a place is necessary. So the mosque will have space for worship, it will also be a place where the good and bad in women's life can be discussed and decisions taken. To discuss income generation, their problems – the problems of women whose lives are affected – and education of their girls. It should be overall a community centre. Definitely to pray. They will also pray along with the Jamaat. So I suggested that there is a need for space for women to pray and that a mosque is needed. I suggested it and the women proposed it.

Narrator

The film on Lata PM, known as an environmental activist, deals with the issue of environment in general and the particular politics surrounding the River Narmada. The film also deals with both the public and personal dimensions of the issues of health, caste and gender. And finally, Lata shares with us her experiences of being a full-time grass roots level activist.

Interview Excerpt:

Lata PM: 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-kumkum ceremony.

Interviewer: For any programme...

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

Interviewer: Give flowers...

Lata PM: And there is a ceremony of godh bhara – 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.

Interviewer: Water, land, jungle.

Lata PM: 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.

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.

Interviewer: 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 PM: *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.*

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.

Interviewer: From the beginning it has talked about it.

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

Narrator

The last two films, on Thokchom Ramani Devi and Jarjum Ete, take us to the northeastern region of the country, which we felt needed to be brought into focus because of its specific problems. Thokchom Ramani Devi is secretary of the All Manipur Women's Reformation and Development Samaj. She talks to us not only about her own life and activism, but about the immense struggle that still confronts women activists like her. Her group has been fighting against alcoholism and has been engaged in a protracted struggle against the army which has been given special powers in the region. The film reveals how women have even staked their lives fighting for these causes. Jarjum Ete is chair person of the State Commission for women in Arunachal Pradesh. The film that we have made on Jarjum Ete offers some hope in terms of the efforts being taken to deal with women's lives and women's history in a region, in a tribal region, which has a very distinct culture and a very different attitude towards women.

Interview Excerpt

Thokchom Ramani Devi: They have no respect for the women of Manipur. Though we agitate there is no action from the government. If the government took up some action, they would have been afraid but there is no action. Not only this; there are so many rape cases that we go to nooks and corners holding the meira, holding the torch to maintain peace in Manipur so that there is no violence. We don't allow the men to come out as they are caught and killed. If we insist, the men would surely come out. Today the number of men is reducing because they are being killed every day. We have more

women; we may end up with no men. The army sent by the government to Manipur to protect us, which is their job, instead of protecting us, they are raping the women.

We have longstanding problems and they don't seem to be ending. We want peace before we die, but I think death will come before it.

*Heirangkhoini is the fruit we eat,
No other fruit tastes better in the mouth
Lotus flowers are blooming in
And male bees are following.
Come, come my dear, let's go,
There are many jealous people
Walk ahead of me...*

Let us finish here; I am tired.

Jarjum Ete: In fact we still don't have paid staffers; all of us are volunteers. A couple of full-time volunteers and others are part-time volunteers and it is a membership based organisation. And we have been perhaps able to mobilise some sections of the women today, looking back like, you know.

Interviewer: Jarjum, what exactly was the mandate of APWWS?

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

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

Ete: One, of course the Constitution has lots of provisions for ensuring the equality of both men and women in society. And which actually has not been happening in my state. So right now rather than the teeth and claws our commission would look at our weightage. How much weight we can kind of, you know, put on the government to ensure the implementation of the existing policies especially to ensure the rights of the

women. Of course, when we talk about the teeth that the commissions are not having, I believe it's not just legal provisions, but how you negotiate with the system or the people who are dealing with the things. If you can convince, and convincing is something an individual can do kind of, you know, when you are interacting or when you are personally convinced it is easier and perhaps possible to convince the other person.

Narrator

These ten films made by Sparrow traverse great distances in terms of themes and regions. The freedom movement, later on the setting up of academic institutions for action oriented studies on women, the complexities of the women's movement, community and regional identities, personal struggles, political actions – all these make up the body of these films. These films are about issues but they are also about these women for whom their personal lives and the action that they are committed to are combined in one sphere of existence.