

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

**SITE: INDIA**

**Transcript of Vina Mazumdar  
Interviewer: C.S. Lakshmi**

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**SPARROW**

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

**B-32, Jeet Nagar,**

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

**Mumbai-400061**

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

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

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

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**Vina Mazumdar** was born in 1927 and educated at Calcutta, Banaras, and Oxford. She is an Honours Graduate and D.Phil from Oxford University. In her professional career she has been a teacher of Political Science in the Universities of Patna and Berhampur, an Officer in the UGC Secretariat and Fellow of the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Simla. She was Member Secretary, Committee on the Status of Women in India, and later Director, Programme of Women's Studies, Indian Council of Social Science Research for five years (1975-80). She was founder-Director of the Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi from 1980 to 1991, and thereafter was Senior Fellow at CWDS and JP Naik National Fellow, ICSSR for two years. She is one of the pioneers in Women's Studies in India and a leading figure of the women's movement. Since 1996 she has been the Chairperson, Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi.

**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).

## Vina Mazumdar Transcript

*Vina Mazumdar calls herself a chronicler and recorder of the women's movement in India. She also fondly refers to herself as the grandmother of Women's Studies in India. As the Member Secretary of the Committee on the Status of Women in India she was instrumental in drafting what is now known as the Towards Equality report which has been the turning point both for Women's Studies and women's movement in India. She is the co-founder of the Center for Women's Development Studies in Delhi and has served as its Director for any years. This pioneering institution has greatly influenced the course Women's Studies has taken in India. Vina Mazumdar is 76 years old and is still active voicing her protest and influencing policies regarding women.*

**C.S.Lakshmi: Vinadi, you have called yourself a chronicler and recorder of the women's movement and grandmother of Women's Studies in South Asia. Your generation has also been called the 'Daughters of Independence.' As daughters of independence, did you inherit a women's movement?**

Vina Mazumdar: Well, in terms of sheer...members of a particular generation, along with all the rest, I did shout that slogan 'Stree Swadheenata Zindabad.'<sup>1</sup> You could say that we grew up with this kind of a feeling about being free in free India and be treated at par with men, beyond that, I have to confess that I wasn't aware of much of the issues beyond those experienced by middle class 'Bhadralok'<sup>2</sup> women in my part of the country. So there was no real consciousness of the women's issue as such. And that's why the whole exercise of the Committee On The Status Of Women<sup>3</sup> in India came as such a terrible shock. It's that terrible shame and outrage — that we claimed ourselves to be highly educated professional women, and social scientists at that, and we knew nothing about the lives of the overwhelming majority of women in this country — both, the lives that they had inherited, and the lives that they were facing in contemporary India. This was the real foundation for what I have described as the collective consciousness during the committee's exercise. It hit us all, to... the... particularly, the four who went on to become members of the drafting committee.

**C.S.Lakshmi: In general what would you say was happening with women after independence? Because leaders like Kamaladevi<sup>4</sup> and all were still there, you know, they**

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<sup>1</sup> Long Live Women's Freedom. *Stree*— (derived from Sanskrit) woman; *Swadheenata*—(derived from Sanskrit) freedom, independence; *Zindabad*—(Hindi/Urdu) hail; long live.

<sup>2</sup> "Bhadralok," which means gentleman or polite man, makes up less than 2 percent of the Indian population. It is a social group that originated in Bengal (a region now divided between the state of West Bengal in India and Bangladesh) during the period of British rule in the 18th and 19th centuries. Myths about the group's intellectual prowess, however, are still so dominant that even today people from Bengal are considered to be more educated and cultured than the rest of India.

<sup>3</sup> The Committee on the Status of Women in India was appointed by the government in 1971. The report, "Towards Equality" (1974) raised basic questions about the socialization processes inherent in a hierarchical society, about the resources, power and assets distribution patterns as well as diverse cultural values in the country.

<sup>4</sup> Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay—(1903 – 1988) often described as *Karmayogi* (literally, "saint of labor," conscientious worker) was the force behind the resurgence of traditional Indian crafts in post independent India. A woman ahead of her times, she set up the All India Handicrafts Board, the Crafts Council of India and its affiliate bodies and the

**were part of the freedom movement<sup>5</sup> — they were still there. So what would you say in general was happening?**

Vina Mazumdar: Well, all this — some of this I heard much, much later, after the committee's report, when I went to request Kamladevi Chattopadhyay<sup>6</sup>, whether she would record her memories of the pre-independence period. After thinking she did agree and that's the inception of "Indian Women's Battle for Freedom." But she told me one or two things which substantiated my personal experience of having sort of, fallen out of the struggle altogether you know. She said that when the Punjab<sup>7</sup> Assembly tried to change the inheritance laws, she went around Delhi,<sup>8</sup> to the women's organisations to mobilise some protest so that women would go to Chandigarh<sup>9</sup> and demonstrate there. And she met with such lukewarm response that she was completely disheartened. She said, "You tell me that you had no consciousness. Well, I had some experience of that — I couldn't get enough support to fill one bus to go to Chandigarh and protest." There were quite a few other instances, which we found out during the committee's exercise. The most classical example of opposition to women's equality was, of course, Choudhary Charan Singh<sup>10</sup> when he was Chief Minister<sup>11</sup> of Uttar Pradesh,<sup>12</sup> writing to the Home Secretary<sup>13</sup> that, "Why do you keep recruiting women into the services? They are a headache." So, the Home Secretary very apologetically wrote back that it's not something that he could prevent and drew the Chief Minister's attention to Article 16 of the Constitution.<sup>14</sup> The next letter from the Chief Minister said, "Well, at least, in that case, don't send any of them to Uttar Pradesh." Sucheta Kripalani<sup>15</sup> when she was Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, had invited

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Regional Handicrafts Design Centers. She was also the first president of the World Crafts Council Asia Pacific Region.

<sup>5</sup> The freedom movement was a response to the expansion of the British Empire and the means employed to annex and expand, which forced changes for India. What resulted were many minor uprisings between 1816 and 1855, with the last and most severe revolt occurring 1857-1859 in which both aristocracy and peasantry rallied against the British. Opposition to British rule began to increase at the turn of the century and the Indian National Congress began to push for a measure of participation in the Government of the country. An unpopular attempt to partition Bengal in 1905 resulted in mass demonstrations against it. Launching of the Swadeshi Movement brought the freedom movement to the ordinary people, by leaders like Bala Gangadhar Tilak and Aurobindo Ghose and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, mobilizing the people into a powerful force against the British in the freedom struggle.

<sup>6</sup> A freedom fighter, patron of traditional art and culture and a stalwart in the field of women's education.

<sup>7</sup> Punjab: A region in northern India, divided in 1947 between Pakistan and India.

<sup>8</sup> Delhi: city in northern India, of which the newer part, New Delhi, is the capital.

<sup>9</sup> Chandigarh—an autonomous city that is the capital of the Indian states of Punjab and Haryana. It was planned by the famous architect Le Corbusier.

<sup>10</sup> Choudhary Charan Singh—(1902-1987) of the Janata Party, was the fifth Prime Minister of India, in office during 1979-1980.

<sup>11</sup> Chief Minister—head of the government of individual states in India.

<sup>12</sup> Uttar Pradesh—state in north India

<sup>13</sup> Home Secretary—heads the Ministry of Home Affairs, which aids and advises State Governments on matters of internal and national security and peace.

<sup>14</sup> Article 16 of the (Indian) Constitution—"Equality of opportunity in matters of public employment." Mazumdar is referencing Clause 2 which states that "No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, descent, place of birth, residence or any of them, be ineligible for, or discriminated against in respect of, any employment or office under the State."

<sup>15</sup> Sucheta Kripalani--first female Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh in 1936.

from Kerala<sup>16</sup>, a Gandhian lady — Mrs Karkut, I think, to build this women’s component within the community development programme, and she had built it on classical Gandhian<sup>17</sup> lines you see, literacy, including knowledge of the constitutional new rights, economic activities and maternity and child health. They, that entire programme was smashed by Charan Singh, and Mrs Karkut was driven out.

**C.S.Lakshmi: Vinadi, when the committee was set up, what was its mandate?**

Vina Mazumdar: That we have to review, what we need is a review of the extent to which the constitutional provisions relating to women have been achieved. So, it begins with: [reads from book] “To examine the constitutional, legal, and administrative provisions that have a bearing on the social status of women, their education and employment. To assess the impact of these provisions during the period since independence. Then, on educational — specific references to educational development — problems of working women including discrimination in employment and remuneration. Status of women as housewives and mothers in the changing social patterns and case studies — to undertake case studies on the implications of population policies and family planning programmes on the Status Of Women.” In fact, the significant omission in this is, the word ‘political’ is completely missing. So the kind of ‘political’ awareness of the whole issue of women’s status that had developed during the freedom struggle, or that could be found in the writings of this man [Points to a book: *Gandhi on Women*] was completely absent. I mean, he went on saying that not only must women not suffer from any legal disabilities that men do not suffer from, they must have complete political equality. They must have the vote, but the problem does not end there. It only begins when women begin to women. Later, in trying to explain this paragraph I say, what he meant — to say, “women as women” you see, the collective consciousness. That’s what he had in mind.

**C.S.Lakshmi: Vinadi when you were appointed as member of the committee, how did you think you would work on the report, considering what the mandate was?**

Vina Mazumdar: I can say that in the first year of my membership, I was a very indifferent and disinterested member and also missed a few meetings and nothing much was actually going on. One meeting we went to, we were informed by the Member-Secretary that we had to meet the Minister in the afternoon with an outline of the report. I was wondering what sort of an outline, because none of us really had a clue what was the state of progress. Very few tours had been done, and what kind of information was being gathered, we just did not know. I just put down a few chapter headings and it was easy. We had set up several task forces, so I got – according to the various task forces - one chapter each, and in that, I added one chapter on the demographic perspective. And my colleagues asked me why had I introduced this? It was not within the terms of reference. So if I had the terms of reference before me as I did today, I would have drawn attention to that last term about population policies, but at that point, my only explanation was

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<sup>16</sup> One of the smallest states in India; located on the Malabar (western) coast at the southern tip of the Indian peninsula.

<sup>17</sup> Gandhian—a follower of Mahatma Gandhi’s philosophies, the main tenets of which are usually identified as *ahimsa* (non-violence), *satyagraha* (quest for truth), *swadeshi* (self-sufficiency).

that my colleague in the UGC,<sup>18</sup> Shankaranarayan had given me the report on the ‘Status Of Women in Japan.’ He said, “You are part of that committee, you might like to have a look at this.” And I found in that a chapter on demographic changes. So I thought you know that it would be a useful thing to have. None of us had a clue as to what were the demographic changes. So I said, “Well, that’s an exercise we can do still, there is no difficulty. There are excellent demographers in the country.” So, with that one sheet of chapter outline headings, we went to the Minister. Then, there was a message from the Planning Commission: Okay, there was a transition taking place, a new plan was about to be drafted, so if the committee had any suggestions... They decided that it would be good courtesy since a committee like this was already in session for more than a year-and-a-half. So again, a hasty exercise, with people saying something etc. So, at that stage, putting together whatever suggestions were worth anything coming from different members. I had to do the drafting job because our Member Secretary just wouldn’t do it.

And then she disappeared from the country and two years were about to expire. So, everybody expected that the committee would seek an extension. At that stage, some of us got together and told Phulrenudi, “We can’t go on like this so, and we refuse to be party to wasting public funds in this manner, so we would prefer to resign.” So she said, “I also will join you.” So, eight of us went and met the ministers with our resignation letter. At which stage he said, “Don’t, Please don’t publicise this. Give me a little time.” So within, literally within 10 days, he had got the committee reconstituted and the only real change was that the Member- Secretary was dropped and I was put in as Member- Secretary.

**C.S.Lakshmi: Vinadi you had one year to prepare a very important report. Can you tell us how you went about the process of collecting the material and initiating the whole process of drafting this report?**

Vina Mazumdar: Well, a few things had been initiated earlier, because Phulrenudi sent me to participate in the political task force that had been set up before I joined as a member of the committee. I attended one meeting and I went and told Phulrenudi, “You will get nothing from this group because” - I was very rude - I said, “Phulrenudi these are women with political aspirations, they want to get into politics, but they can’t define what is politics. So they haven’t a clue where information is available.” So she said, “How do we go about it?” I said, “Look, listen, there’s a hell of a lot of work that has been done on Indian politics, particularly since independence, there are academics galore who have studied every election since independence. So if we call in their help, at least available research-based information can be gathered.” So she said, “You go now, go now and talk to Naiksaab<sup>19</sup>.” When I went to Naiksaab, Naiksaab said, “Alright, what do you want?” I said, “I need a working group. I need people like Iqbal to put together what is available. I can’t do it because I have my work in the commission to cope with.” In that working group I just pleaded with people like Iqbal saying that please please undertake the research. They were the survey researchers, they were the ones who had been studying

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<sup>18</sup> UGC—University Grants Commission, formally established in November 1956 as a statutory body of the Government of India through an Act of Parliament for the coordination, determination and maintenance of standards of university education in India.

<sup>19</sup> J. P. Naik (Naiksaab) was a Gandhian who was director of the Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR). *Saab*—(Hindi) respectful form of address—Sir—suffixed after a male name.

elections. So Iqbal said, “Alright, I will go and talk it over with Naiksaab, I will identify people.” But once I became member secretary - Lotikadi (Lotika Sarkar)<sup>20</sup>, Leela Dube<sup>21</sup> and myself, plus Kumud Sharma<sup>22</sup> - between the four of us, we drew up a long list of additional research to be done, some of which will be, will require even field level studies — and all in a very short time. That’s the way I wrote the political chapter, you know. I spent three nights, three nights reading the ‘potha’<sup>23</sup> which Iqbal had sent and that Sirsikar had sent, and then in one day, fourteen hours non-stop dictation — the chapter got written.

**C. S. Lakshmi: Vinadi, what was the nature of the material that was coming in from the field and the women who were involved in drafting this report. What was their perspective towards the material that was coming in?**

Vina Mazumdar: You see, the material, the information — there were variations in different states — but the marked difference that we had noticed in Himachal Pradesh<sup>24</sup> between what the middle-class women were posing and what the peasant women were saying — there was this marked difference. One tremendous challenge I must tell you that, there was this kisaan<sup>25</sup> woman in a village who just stood up and said that, “Go and ask the government of Himachal: Who runs the Himachal economy — the men, or we? Because the majority of the men go off to the plains in search of jobs, or they go to join the army or the police. We do. It is a orchard economy of agriculture — we do all the work. But because of this taboo on our taking up the plough, we have to find, search desperately for hired labour just to engage — sometimes when it becomes difficult, we do operate the plough, but we lose face in the village.” So here was something. When we went to the North-East — Arunachal, Nagaland, Manipur.<sup>26</sup> From the educated, urban women — alright, they were working in various offices — clerks, typists, a few doctors, a few teachers — we couldn’t get a word out, only giggles. But the next morning, when we went to the village, the entire village people were lined up in a circle — men, as well as women. And they had put a few chairs for the Committee members and the Home Secretary who was accompanying us and also acting as interpreter. And there was this one woman who came and stood before us. And she came up with these absolute challenges about the threats women faced from the presence of the army, and the Home Secretary was feeling terrible. You know, he was trying to stop her, but she went on. She went on, and there was one young woman standing just next to me - she found the Home Secretary’s translation was wrong. So she shouted up in English, “That’s not what she said. Why are you distorting?” So I called her. I said, “You translate.” She was a primary school teacher. And she translated and she said, “This is what she’s been saying.” Now, we were taking notes. That evening, the three of us, Lotikadi, Urmila (Urmila Haksar)<sup>27</sup> and myself, we had a real discussion. And Lotikadi said, “Can you tell me, what this development is all about?” So, Urmila promptly said, “This is something we

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<sup>20</sup> Lotika Sarkar was one of the founder members of CWDS.

<sup>21</sup> A pioneer of feminist anthropology and ethnography in India. She has addressed a range of interrelated themes including gender, kinship, caste and culture.

<sup>22</sup> Sociologist at the Centre for Women's Development Studies who has worked extensively on women's issues in India.

<sup>23</sup> *potha*—(Bengali) parcel, packet.

<sup>24</sup> Himachal Pradesh is a mountainous state in North India.

<sup>25</sup> *kisaan*—(Hindi) farmer.

<sup>26</sup> Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, and Manipur are state in the northeast corner of India.

<sup>27</sup> Author of the Minority Protection and International Bill of Human Rights.



have to [probe], this question has to be posed in the Committee — now a report.” So, this is how the questions were coming off the soil. And much earlier, again it was Urmila — who had in, during one of the discussions of the Committee persuaded — asked to adopt what I have described as a self-denying ordinance — that we are not going to look at feminist literature from the West because ours is a fact-finding exercise and we are going to draw the issues from the soil. So, nobody read anything coming from the West. This self-denying ordinance, as far as I am concerned, still remains. I don’t think... and I’m a supporter of International Women’s Movement, and we have participated in all the debates at the International level — but the kind of, you know, imposition of paradigms from the West that we had to fight in the whole development debate, the same kind of imposition is going on today, and that has to be fought.

**C. S. Lakshmi: Vinadi, you had written in one of the articles that all of you had to work literally round the clock to prepare this report because the time was very short... and in the ‘Towards Equality’ Report there’s also a note of dissent. So within the short time of writing the report you’ve also had time to do this note of dissent. So, can you tell us about that note?**

Vina Mazumdar: Well, the issue as you know was over this reservation<sup>28</sup>. Lotika Sarkar and myself, like other members of our generation, had always adopted the position that we want equality — and we want non-discrimination. We do not want special protection, we do not want reservation. That had been our position and the... But, what was coming off the soil — first from political activists — young, women political activists, middle-aged women, from different political parties they said that, “Whenever work has to be done, we are called, but when tickets have to be distributed, you have to be someone’s daughter or someone’s wife or someone’s mistress.” And there was a distinct feeling of resentment amongst the activists, which did not look good for the future. The second was the united position taken by my political science friends who had undertaken these studies. All of them — all of them wrote. And when they sent in their reports, in their introductions, they said clearly that political equality had not brought about real equality because in the political deliberations of the nation, women’s proportion was falling. All these groups combined to recommend very strongly that the Constitution does provide special protection for women if necessary, and we think reservation should be considered. In the Committee, however, there was a very remarkable cleavage. Lalit Sen who was a rural sociologist and he had done an enormous amount of work on our panchayats,<sup>29</sup> rural politics, social transition, the community development programme. He came and said categorically, he said, “When it comes to what the constitution says about women and about children, there is just no awareness in rural society; that women have been assured any rights under the Constitution is just not there; so something has to be done.” So the Committee agreed to make a recommendation about the introduction of Women’s panchayats — a sort of a conversion of the Mahila Mandal<sup>30</sup> into a different sort of constitutionally, legally protected body as the spokespeople for women’s interests. That recommendation they accepted. When it came to

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<sup>28</sup> This is a reference to the reservation of seats held in the Parliament and state legislatures; this reservation is supposed to guarantee that 33 percent of these seats will be occupied by female representatives.

<sup>29</sup> *panchayats*—literally, rule by 5 representatives, elected at the village-level in India, established post-independence to decentralize power and enable people to achieve legal and political resolutions to local problems.

<sup>30</sup> *Mahila Mandal*—Women’s collectives that have organized at the village level in many states across India to address issues around gender rights. In each village, women from different caste groups come together to share health knowledge and improve their socio-economic status.

the State Assemblies<sup>31</sup> and Parliament<sup>32</sup> — flat refusal. Flat refusal of any reservation: “We always opposed reservation, we will.” So at that stage Lotikadi said, “But your position is inconsistent. I too have always opposed reservation for women but I am faced with ground level evidence. I shall be compelled to give a note of dissent.” And I said the same thing — both of us. So that dissent note finally got written only on the very last day. So on 31<sup>st</sup> December, Lotikadi walked into my room and said, “When are you going to draft that dissent note?” “After this we will.” So she closed the door. She said, “I brought your stenographer, now dictate.” So the dissent note was written like that. We are still plagued by that. My position has also changed. I don’t really give a damn whether the Reservation Bill goes through or not, but my advice to these women’s organisations is don’t allow any tampering with the Bill as it stands.

**C.S. Lakshmi: Vinadi what was the impact of the report on all of you and on the nation in general? When they received the report, how did they react to it?**

Vina Mazumdar: Well, as far as we ourselves were concerned, I think the three of us — Lotika, Urmila, myself — we were shattered. Shattered and with a definite impact on our self-images, that — how on earth we had remained completely insensitive towards these issues. Because all of us in the drafting committee, we had to face the issue that our educational system itself had been a great contributor to this, what I call intellectual *purdah*<sup>33</sup> behind which the lives of the majority of the women had been pushed. But the most major impact was that, “What were we going to do with ourselves?” This questioning - and I pushed it to the back of my mind, “Now there is no time, I have got to finish the report.”

But “Towards Equality”, I am increasingly discovering, did not really reach all that many. Where it did go was — it got sent to the U.N. And certain copies had been taken to the Mexico Conference<sup>34</sup>. And people who managed to pick it up, they went and bombarded the embassies asking for more copies of this report. Within the country, it is the summary which a lot of people read, including, now I think, Mrinal Gore<sup>35</sup>, Pramila Dandavate,<sup>36</sup> Ahilya Rangnekar —

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<sup>31</sup> State Assemblies—governments at the state level, elected by people of the state, also called Legislative Assembly (*Vidhan Sabha*).

<sup>32</sup> Parliament—government at the national level, consisting of two houses—the Upper House (*Rajya Sabha*), whose members are elected by State Assemblies and Lower House (*Lok Sabha*), whose members are elected directly by the people of India.

<sup>33</sup> *purdah*—(Urdu/Hindi)—literally, curtain; used to mean the veil worn by some Muslim women. Often used colloquially to refer to more general patterns of seclusion.

<sup>34</sup> The first International Women’s World Conference was organized by the United Nations and held in Mexico City in 1975 to promote equal rights for women worldwide.

<sup>35</sup> Known as a political reformer; as the representative of common people, she has always fought for the issues that affect the everyday life of the ordinary citizens. She became a well-known figure in the politics of Maharashtra because of the active role she played in the Anti-Price Rise Agitation (*Mahagai Virodhi Andolan*).

<sup>36</sup> Pramila Dandavate—elected as member of the Lok Sabha (Lower House) in Parliament, she championed many women’s movements, among which are campaigns against dowry, sati, and rape, an active presence in the Mathura rape case, the Roop Kanwar case, and responsible in part for new laws motivating inquiries into “accidental deaths” (often dowry deaths) of married women.

the three of them were in jail during the emergency.<sup>37</sup> And they told me later that we spent the 19 months in jail wading through this Mahakhat.<sup>38</sup> And they came absolutely charged, but the first question, Mrinal and Ahilya both were in Parliament — ’77 elections — and they said, “We are going to assemble all the women members of Parliament but you and Lotika have to come and explain certain things which nobody understands. The first question, this declining sex ratio what does it mean? What is it?”

In the academic world it percolated slowly, but within a few years, the kind of proposals that the ICSSR<sup>39</sup> Committee on Women’s Studies began to receive were an indication — it was making an impact. The international impact Lotikadi and I realised in 1976, a year later — both of us had been invited to First International Conference on Women and Development<sup>40</sup> being organised by a group of what you might call Area Studies scholars, feminist scholars — but they were specialists in particular regions, they had worked there, in Wellesley College near Boston. We landed up to find that everybody — a whole lot of people there had read the report and had a lot of questions. Whereas women from other third world countries who had things to say which were very similar to what we had found, they hadn’t had access to the report. So that’s where the Third World alliances were forged and we took the first chance to take the issue before the Non-Aligned (Movement).<sup>41</sup>

**C.S Lakshmi: Vinadi, you have talked about the emergence of a collective conscience, but before that you must have undertaken an individual journey, kind of a personal voyage which should have been there before that. So can you tell us about your growing years in Kolkatta,<sup>42</sup> and the early influences in your life?**

Vina Mazumdar: Well, since you are a fellow student of history, you picked out the right symbols. I suppose it does feel like a journey but I can’t say that I was conscious at that time.

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<sup>37</sup> Emergency—a state of emergency in India from 26 June 1975 to 21 March 1977, proclaimed by the prime minister at the time, Indira Gandhi. During the emergency, many civil liberties such as the freedom of the press were suspended, and many activists and journalists were jailed. A state of emergency is a period of governance under an altered constitutional setup that can be proclaimed by the President of India, when s/he perceives threats to the nation from internal and external sources or from financial situations of crisis. Under the advice of the cabinet of ministers and using the powers vested in him/her largely by the Part XVIII of the Constitution of India, the President can overrule many provisions of the constitution that guarantee fundamental rights to the citizens of India, and acts governing devolution of powers to the states which form the federation. In the history of independent India, there have been only three periods during which a state of emergency was declared.

<sup>38</sup> *mahakhat*—(Sanskrit/Hindi)—literally, great epic or in this context, bulky manuscript.

<sup>39</sup> ICSSR—the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) was established in the year of 1969 by the Government of India to promote research in social sciences in the country.

<sup>40</sup> First International Conference on Women and Development—convened in Mexico City under the aegis of the United Nations to coincide with the 1975 International Women's Year, observed to remind the international community that discrimination against women continued to be a persistent problem in much of the world.

<sup>41</sup> Non-Aligned Countries—formed in the 1950s on the initiative of Indian Prime Minister Nehru and then-president of Yugoslavia Tito, as well as Nassar of Egypt and Sukarno of Indonesia. The grouping brought together the states of the world that did not wish to align themselves with either of the Cold War superpowers, the former USSR and the USA. Important members included India, Egypt, and, for a time, the People's Republic of China. While the organization was intended to be as close an alliance as NATO or the Warsaw Pact, it never had much cohesion and many of its members were induced to or unable to resist aligning with one or another of the great powers.

<sup>42</sup> Kolkatta—formerly, Calcutta, capital of West Bengal, a major Indian metropolis (others are New Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Bangalore, and Hyderabad all of which are served by international airports).

It's later, recollecting that I sorted out the early influences, what made a lot of impression, and the pure love of history helped. I was born into a middle-class Bengali family. I was born in Calcutta in 1927. But the family was very used to being a migrant household because my father worked on the nursing and harnessing of rivers and so he was all the time being shunted, being moved, from one place to another. So my mother had spent 11 years in the South, picked up a fair amount of Telugu, Tamil and Kannada<sup>43</sup> and I suppose she had, by the standards of those days, she had a much more varied exposure. She was certainly the strongest influence on my growing-up period.

**C.S.Lakshmi: Vinadi, you mentioned your father. What kind of a person was he?**

Vina Mazumdar: My father was again a mixture. He was a scientist, he became a civil engineer, determined to learn how to reduce the ravages of floods. And, at the same time, he thought of himself as a very traditional Indian of that generation. What made me tremendously proud and left a very deep impression was his decision to take premature retirement in 1942, when he received orders to collaborate with the army in mining all the dams and embankments in East Bengal,<sup>44</sup> which he had helped to build. So he went straight from that meeting to his office, wrote out an application seeking premature retirement with immediate effect.

**C.S.Lakshmi: 1942 was an important year, and in your family with the decision your father had taken — what were you in 1942? Were you in school or had you completed school?**

Vina Mazumdar: I had just finished school and appeared for my — what was called-matriculation<sup>45</sup> of those days. One of my cousins was going to Ashutosh College<sup>46</sup> to take part in some student protests and I went along with her. And that was the first induction to taking part in student politics. After that, the other steps came very easily — getting elected as the Secretary of the students' union of the Girls' section of the college. And in the late '40s, most of us were out taking part in some demonstration or another. There was something or the other going on all the time — some days the INA trials<sup>47</sup> started and Calcutta University colleges poured, students poured out, completely. So these... finding an opportunity to take bigger students from my college to go and have a look at the Mahatama<sup>48</sup> who came in the middle of all this — he was staying just outside Calcutta. A lot of excitement. But one interesting memory which surfaced much, much later — and when I checked it with other student activists, whether my memory was

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<sup>43</sup> Telugu, Tamil, Kannada—three of the four major South Indian languages, spoken by majorities in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka, respectively. In the south Indian state of Kerala, Malayalam is the official language.

<sup>44</sup> East Bengal—formerly part of Bengal. After partition in 1947 (following independence from the British), it became part of East Pakistan. In 1971, after several years of civil war, became the separate country of Bangladesh.

<sup>45</sup> matriculation—one of three systems of high school education in India; refers to a final high school exam (in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade), after which one is eligible for admission to an undergraduate program.

<sup>46</sup> Ashutosh College is located in Kolkata, West Bengal and was founded by Sir Asutosh Mookherjee in 1916. The institute was upgraded to a Degree College in 1918-19. Following the sad demise of Sir Asutosh on May 24, 1924, the college was renamed as Ashutosh College under the presidency of his son, Dr. Shyamaprasad Mookherjee.

<sup>47</sup> Indian National Army—formed in January 1942 through the efforts of Subash Chandra Bose; announced by the Propaganda Ministry in Berlin where Bose traveled for mobilization and support.

<sup>48</sup> Literally “great spirit”; used as a title of respect for a person renowned for spirituality and high-mindedness. Here she is referring to Mohandas Gandhi.

strong enough or whether they had... You see, there were three common slogans ‘Azaad Hindustan ki Jai’, ‘Chattra Ekta Zindabad’, ‘Stree Swadheenata Zindabad.’<sup>49</sup>

**C.S.Lakshmi: Vinadi, Can you tell us something about your Oxford experience?**

Vina Mazumdar: Sure. The first, first major experience was the jump in confidence and losing the fear of the unfamiliar. Because I had never been away from the family and because I was the youngest in the family, everybody – all the brothers, sisters, parents – there was a, there was a kind of protective attitude, and outside the immediate family, in this big extended family again there, I was the... I was a kid, kid cousin you see. But finding myself waiting for a train to Oxford in Paddington, I felt so paralysed with fear. I just didn’t know what I was going to do. In this whole country there isn’t a soul I know. But, it was, educationally, it was a very rewarding experience, a very rewarding experience. Three years went by quite quickly and I came back. I came back just after the Constitution had been adopted and India had become a Republic.

**C.S.Lakshmi: Vinadi, you said that when you came back the constitution was already adopted. So, in 1947 when India attained independence, were you in Delhi then?**

Vina Mazumdar: Oh yes, from ’46 onwards, I had gone to Delhi to join my father and that’s where I sat for all those entrance exams to Oxford. As a result, we escaped the great Calcutta killing of ’46<sup>50</sup> but managed to be very much present at the midnight session of Parliament,<sup>51</sup> transfer of power, and heard Jawaharlal’s<sup>52</sup> great speech. Prior to that, I did sit in the visitors’ gallery. Quite a few days I [had been] listening to the Constituent Assembly debates and so full of the sort of euphoria. I have very vivid memories of the 15<sup>th</sup> of August. My father woke me up early morning and said, “Come for a walk, don’t you want to see the Union Jack coming down and the tricolour going up?” So we went, walked to India Gate and saw the flag being changed. And then, these masses of people outside the Parliament building after the morning session on the 15<sup>th</sup> — 14<sup>th</sup> night had been the midnight session and 15<sup>th</sup> morning was the formal session. And I sat on the bonnet of our car watching this sea of humanity — a lot of excitement.

**C.S.Lakshmi: What happened after you returned from Oxford? You said you wanted to teach...**

Vina Mazumdar: I first talked to my mother and she said “Go and talk to your father.” So with a lot of trepidation, I went — and asked him, “I want to apply for a teaching job.” So he looked at me and said, “Well, that was understood.” I looked rather blank, so he laughed. He said, “Look, when I agreed to your going to Oxford, I knew this day would come. So I was prepared. In the

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<sup>49</sup> Long Live Free India, Long Live Student Unity, Long Live Women’s Independence.

<sup>50</sup> Great Calcutta killing of 1946—The Muslim League in then-Bengal called for “Direct Action Day,” on 16 August, 1946, to secure its demand for Pakistan. There was considerable inter-communal killing.

<sup>51</sup> Midnight session of Parliament—refers to Jawaharlal Nehru’s “Tryst With Destiny” speech at the midnight of August 14/15, 1947, when the British formally handed over political control to India and Pakistan, which was declared a separate Muslim country. Nehru was selected to be the first Prime Minister of independent India and Mohammad Jinnah the first Prime Minister of Pakistan.

<sup>52</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru, also called Pandit (“Teacher”) Nehru, was the leader of the socialist wing of the Indian National Congress during and after India’s struggle for independence from Britain. He became the first Prime Minister of India at independence on August 15, 1947, holding the office until his death in 1964.

meantime, something else has happened. The country has adopted a new Constitution which tells me I cannot discriminate between you and your brothers and since I have always told them that my job ends with providing them with some education, and after that their life's decisions must be their own, the same thing applies to you. So, go ahead and apply and I am very happy that you want to teach rather than go into..." - go and sit for the competitive exams which my brothers were pressing me to do. So, I started applying and I did get an offer from Baroda University.<sup>53</sup> My father was a bit unhappy. He said, "It is so far away." I was not quite well, so I'd asked for one month's joining time. Suddenly in the middle of that month, quite unexpectedly, the Patna University — they had invited me for the interview and I had not gone — because it was very hot. I was not well and people told me, "Nobody's going to give you a job in Bihar."<sup>54</sup> You are a Bengali,<sup>55</sup> you are a woman and you are young, so on three counts, *nahi milega*<sup>56</sup>." But anyway, I did get to Patna, the Vice Chancellor had a final meeting with me and the job was offered. So I joined in the middle of 1951 and I quit that University only in 1965 when I came to...came to the University Grants Commission.

**C.S.Lakshmi: Vinadi, I think the years between 1951 and the time when you were appointed member of the Committee For The Status Of Women In India are very important years in your life. Because those are years when you make a lot of moves from one place to another and that is also the time when you got married and you set up a family and other things. So, can you tell us something about your joining Patna University to teach, because at that time you still wanted to teach?**

Vina Mazumdar: Yes...no, I certainly wanted to teach and I suppose I was looking for an independent life. And the changes that took place in the '50s, you know, they sort of came one on top of the other. They were all very rapid and they made deep changes in my life but that does not mean the teaching faded into the backgrounds. I enjoyed. The first great change of course — apart from my marriage and the arrival of the first two daughters — was the departure, in rapid succession — between '56 and '59, I lost my father, I lost my mother-in-law, who loved me enormously, and then my mother. So, when I try to think back to the '50s, it is the feeling of being bereft — you know, being left to fend for myself. And that's why I think the opportunity to go back to Oxford for a hard stint of work, more because I felt that if I were staying in this profession, I have to do some solid work. And, but I was compelled to take the kids along with me because the two mothers had departed.

**C. S. Lakshmi: Vinadi, when did you return from Oxford?**

Vina Mazumdar: '62. I was out for exactly two years. I came back to find my department — all the old seniors who had been so friendly, so beneficent, let me say — they had all gone and the atmosphere of the new department was very different to what it had been earlier. Also, the last pair of kids also arrived. But by that time, the first two had grown up a bit, so they shared — they shared a great deal of the rearing responsibilities along with their father.

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<sup>53</sup> Baroda is a city in western India.

<sup>54</sup> Bihar—state in North India.

<sup>55</sup> Bengali—language spoken by the majority in the state of West Bengal.

<sup>56</sup> *nahi milega*— (Hindi) "will not get (something)."

The Education Commission had just started functioning in 1964 and that was when I was realising that I must get out of Patna University. I couldn't continue. So this, it seemed to be a good idea, that this is the time when it would be a good thing to go there. Whatever comes out of this commission, there would be measures for reform. And it coincided with Shankra's plan. He wanted a little more time to devote to his training. So I sent off an application. I wanted a hand in it. So that way, the UGC under D.S. Kothari proved to be an even... I would say that [an] even more powerful learning experience than Oxford had been. I was finding out for the first time what India was all about. Much more than I had known. So — challenging, exciting but very hard work, very strenuous. I lost 40 pounds in three years after joining the UGC without any volition on my part — '*apne se chalagaya*.'<sup>57</sup> So an offer of a two-year fellowship from Simla Institute to work on Education and Social Change was very welcome.

But before I had been in Simla more than two months, comes an offer of a Chair from the University of Behrampur in Orissa, appointed in-absentia. So, I still couldn't make up my mind. I came down to Delhi. So finally I landed up with D.S. Kothari<sup>58</sup>. I said, "Sir, I don't have a father left. In all such situations, ultimately, it was my father who helped me to make up my mind, so I've come to you." He said, "Now, you have really put me into a difficult situation. I can't advise you as the Chairman, UGC. I have to advise you as your father's substitute. I think you should give the new university a trial."

Before two years were out, the same D.S. Kothari says, "If you want to come back, come back now. Because I have a senior post which you should have had a long time earlier, but now, I have a vacancy there, so now you come." I couldn't... again, what to do? How to make up my mind? No father figures there. So that's when I went to that astrologer.

**C.S.Lakshmi: Vinadi, you must tell us about going to the astrologer and what happened afterwards?**

Vina Mazumdar: Well, he just helped me to make up my mind, you see, because I was not getting any help from any other source. By telling me that if you don't go, things will go badly for your children. There was no question of... so straight to the telegraph office from his house and I sent off a message to the Secretary of the UGC that I will be joining on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of May. But just before leaving Behrampur, this letter from the Education Ministry came saying that you have been appointed to this Committee on the Status of Women in India. Now, when I came back to Delhi and rejoined the UGC, I didn't even remember about this committee, of the sending of an acceptance. But in less than a year-and-a-half from my return, I suddenly found myself Member Secretary of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, something to which, till just six months earlier, I had not attached any importance.

**C.S.Lakshmi: Vinadi you spoke very beautifully about how your personal life got more and more linked with the work that you were doing. Earlier you had spoken about this**

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<sup>57</sup> *apne se chalagaya*—(Hindi) "went away on its own."

<sup>58</sup> Dr. D.S. Kothari is a physicist and astrophysicist. He is well known for research on the ionization of matter by pressure in cold compact objects such as planets.

**“collective consciousness” that all of you had developed at the end of the “Towards Equality” project or during the process of that... Now what happened after that? What was the follow-up after the “Towards Equality” report that you wrote which you say radically altered your life?**

Vina Mazumdar: I needed a break, so I went to visit my brother at Shantiniketan.<sup>59</sup> I took leave for one month. And while there, Emergency was declared and I received a prompt summons from Naiksaab, “Comeback.” So it was Naiksaab who really thought up the follow-up, not me. He was looking absolutely bleak...you remember how fair he was. He was literally looking dark. After a few seconds he resumed and said “They have changed the nature of the polity, I don’t know whether we can ever get back.” And then suddenly as if he had drawn new inspiration from somewhere, he looked up and said, “Well let us focus on women. Go and write a policy paper for a research programme focusing on poor women. I don’t think the powers that be will understand the political significance, at least not just as yet, because I don’t think we will be permitted to do much else. So write down, write down now, write a policy paper. Why such a programme, what should it investigate.... So Kumud and I put our heads together, worked on this — consulted Lotikadi at some stage, consulted Prof. Mitra and that was the inception of the ICSSR’s programme of Women’s Studies. Absolutely on the backdrop of the Emergency. It was a direct outcome.

**C.S.Lakshmi: Is this how the CWDS<sup>60</sup> was set up? After this the CWDS.**

Vina Mazumdar: No, no,no,no,no...CWDS does not come into existence until 1980, my dear. I am still talking about 1975 — the declaration of emergency. Through the Emergency, we concentrated on trying to get studies done on the five areas that we had identified. It was only in ’79 that the committee — the Advisory Committee in charge — adopted a resolution which went to the ICSSR recommending the setting up of an autonomous institution to carry on the seminal work that this programme has initiated. The resolution was drafted jointly by Ashok Mitra and Justice Krishna Iyer.<sup>61</sup>

It went to the government, and one of the things that Mrs Gandhi had done during the Emergency was to constitute a National Committee to do justice to Women, which never met through the 19 months of the Emergency. The Janata government<sup>62</sup> came, that Committee was reconstituted. It met only once and did nothing. But Rajkrishna in the Planning Commission

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<sup>59</sup> *Shantiniketan*—(Sanskrit)—literally, abode of peace; an International University that focuses on the arts, which was founded in West Bengal by Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore with a view to let “the cultures of the East & the West meet and mingle.”

<sup>60</sup> CWDS—Centre for Women’s Development Studies in New Delhi, established in 1980 (see website at <http://www.cwds.org/>).

<sup>61</sup> Justice Krishna Iyer—Credited with a Supreme Court decision that allowed Indira Gandhi to remain in power as Prime Minister despite highly controversial circumstances, leading to her declaration of Emergency on June 26, 1975.

<sup>62</sup> Janata was formed in 1977 to fight Indira Gandhi. It united socialists, Lohia-ites, old Congressmen, rural notables and the Jan Sangh. From the time it took office in March 1977, it soon became clear that there were really two parties struggling to get out from under the Janata name: the Jan Sangh and the rest. Eventually, the Janata government collapsed in 1979, over the issue of dual membership (of the RSS as well as Janata). There was the old Janata, represented most visibly by Chandra Shekhar, its President, and there was the Jan Sangh version, headed by A. B. Vajpayee.



was trying to help, so the Ministry of Social Welfare was negotiating with other ministries to get some support. Again, 1980 election comes.

Well, you know what happened in the 1980 elections<sup>63</sup>. So, a small group — Naiksaab, Ashok Mitra, Lotika Sarkar, myself - we met. What happens now? Naiksaab said, “So Vina, draw up a Constitution. Take a copy of the Registration of Societies Act and there’s a model provided, you can sort of fill in all the material. I will be coming two weeks later, I’ll help you finalise that. So, Ashok, we will meet in two weeks time. Vina will have the Draft Constitution ready, because we have to formalise that decision, and then we will register.” I said, “Naiksaab, *ek paisa ka provision nahi hai, aap kehte ho*.”<sup>64</sup> And he looked at me, he said, “Good work that needs to be done never gets held up for lack of resources, only lack of determination.” So, I said, “Alright, a mantra.”<sup>65</sup> It took some time to absorb, so, by April 1980, the registration was through and Naiksaab had organised a grant from the Vikram Sarabhai Foundation – you know who was responsible. The same person was already working on the Ford Foundation, Kamala – and told me, “Don’t worry, don’t worry. It will take a little time, but the Foundation is quite committed to supporting your venture.” The other hope of support was from the ILO<sup>66</sup> Rural Employment Policies Branch. So that...those were the sort of assurances. But Naiksaab, as soon as this Sarabhai foundation’s message was there, he said, “Now you can afford to go and hire a building.” So I hired a building and we started off. It took nearly the full year for the Ford Grant or the I.L.O grants to be cleared by the Bharat Sarkar.<sup>67</sup>

Now, Nirmala Buch as the representative of the government of India was a member of the ICSSR Committee on Women’s Studies so she had been a party to that resolution recommending the setting up of an autonomous institution. In 19... towards the up... she was just returning from Copenhagen, the mid-decade conference and she came and said, “All the exercises that we did for three solid years, everything is being chucked — declared as junk — what do we do now? How do we save these ideas? How do we ensure that some of this gets into...” because the Janata plan was sort of thrown into the junk heap; a new panning commission under the chairmanship of M.S. Swaminathan<sup>68</sup> had come into existence. So what is [to be done]? Now by that time, I had learnt a few things from Naiksaab. I said, “My dear, this is where you, the

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<sup>63</sup> In 1980 Indira Gandhi was voted back into power by a landslide vote, less than three years after the electorate rejected her "emergency dictatorship." Her Congress (Indira) party had won 351 of the 525 contested seats in the lower house of parliament, virtually wiping out her party's two major contenders. Neither the Janata nor the Lok Dal party gained the requisite 54 seats to qualify for recognition as the official opposition.

<sup>64</sup> “*ek paisa ka provision nahi hai, aap kehte ho*”—(Hindi) translated, it literally means “[But] you are saying that there is no provision for a single penny!”

<sup>65</sup> *mantra*—(Sanskrit) word that has passed into English; a sacred chant; anything that is repeated and held sacred by somebody.

<sup>66</sup> I.L.O.—International Labor Organization, established in 1919 after World War I, following the Treaty of Versailles. India, though not yet an independent country, was one of the founding members of the ILO and has been a permanent member of the ILO Governing Body since 1922.

<sup>67</sup> *Bharat Sarkar*—(Hindi) Indian government or Government of India.

<sup>68</sup> Professor M S Swaminathan has been acclaimed for his work as a plant geneticist and his contributions to the agricultural renaissance of India. His advocacy of sustainable agriculture leading to an ever-green revolution makes him an acknowledged world leader in the field of sustainable food security. The International Association of Women and Development conferred on him the first international award for significant contributions to promoting the knowledge, skill, and technological empowerment of women in agriculture and for his pioneering role in mainstreaming gender considerations in agriculture and rural development.

bureaucrat, and Vina the academic bows out. Because this is not something...you want noise, so you need a mobilisation. This is where we turn to the National Women's Organisations who picked up the dowry<sup>69</sup> issue, picked up the dowry violence issue, picked up the Mathura case<sup>70</sup> issue. These are the people who can mobilise public opinion." So the two of us called up the National Women's Organisations, six of them, and they were kind enough to include the CWDS as a sister organisation, and the...this group met in the office of the Y.W.C.A of India, because Ivy Khan<sup>71</sup> took a lot of interest. 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<sup>72</sup> 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<sup>73</sup>.

**C.S.Lakshmi: Vinadi can you tell us something about — how the Indian Association of Women's Studies was formed and why it was necessary at that time to form this association?**

Vina Mazumdar: In 1980, sometime in 1980, just after the CWDS came into existence, Hemlata Swaroop had become the new Vice-Chancellor of Kanpur University. Once she became Vice-Chancellor, she wanted to do something in the Kanpur University. So she came to Delhi and she talked to me and I said, "Alright, invite Naiksaab, invite a few others, Mrs Buch also." And we met. In that meeting Naiksaab said, "Now we need, you need a national association. If you want to promote Women's Studies within the country, you need a national association. But the best way of going about that is to convene a National Conference, first on Women's Studies — I am sure, Nirmala, the Bharat Sarkar will provide some assistance." He said, "We will have a national committee to convene this conference. And the best person to be Chair of that

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<sup>69</sup> dowry—the system where a 'bride price' is given to the groom. This can range from gifts of money to homes, automobiles, etc. Demands for dowries in cash or kind increased dramatically in the 1980s, as did the phenomenon of 'dowry deaths' or murders during that period.

<sup>70</sup> Mathura case—the notorious case in March 1972. Mathura, a 16-year-old tribal girl from Chandrapur district, Maharashtra, was raped by two policemen on duty at the police station where she was taken by her brothers for attempting to elope with her lover. The Supreme Court overturned a High Court decision that the accused officers be imprisoned for seven years on the technicality of no struggle and the fact that Mathura was already sexually experienced. The shocking verdict caused women's groups around the nation to organize around the issue of rape and justice for women.

<sup>71</sup> Former National General Secretary of the YWCA of India.

<sup>72</sup> Aruna Asaf Ali came to be known as the 'Grand old Lady of the Independence Movement' and the Heroine of the 1942 Movement.' Aruna Asaf Ali's first major political involvement was during Gandhi's "Salt March" (part of his long-term Satyagraha, or "Truth force," campaign), when she addressed public meetings and led processions. She also worked in the local women's league, which was affiliated to the All India Women's Conference. In 1954 she helped to establish the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW), the women's wing of the Communist Party of India. The NFIW was meant to be a radical alternative to existing women's organizations, and one that would reach beyond a middle class membership. The country honoured her with its highest civilian award, the Bharat Ratna.

<sup>73</sup> The Seven Sisters is a group of women's organizations that collaborated in addressing ongoing women's rights issues in India.

Convening Committee is Madhuri Shah, Vice-Chancellor, SNTD Women's University,<sup>74</sup> which is the only institution today which has this research centre focussing on these issues." And out of this national conference, you get a mandate to form an association. That is the democratic approach. That's the way we pushed off. And we knew we could tap UNICEF, we knew we could tap Ford Foundation, some support will be available. So this was decided. So the conference was convened and out of that came the resolution forming the Association.

In '85, several of us were invited to a bi-national seminar on Women's Studies in the United States. You remember, what was it — the Festival of India that year. And we met at Sara Lawrence College. And many of my friends that I had made over the '70s and the early '80s in the Women's Studies world in the United States were there. In that seminar, we were told by the principal of Sara Lawrence College, she said, "You know, you people were much brighter than my colleagues. You took the stand that Women's Studies is not a discipline." She knew the entire story. "You decided that it was a perspective which needed to be incorporated in all the other Social Science disciplines." She said, "Yours was, that kind of legitimacy that you were able to organize. I wish we had thought of that earlier."

**C. S. Lakshmi: Vinadi, this recording will be incomplete if I don't ask you about the Bankura project in West Bengal that CWDS has taken up. It's very close to your heart and you have written a lot about it and you have spoken a lot about it. So, can you tell us just little about it?**

Vina Mazumdar: Well, this is the I.L.O. Project which I mentioned earlier. Soon after the Centre came into existence, I went to West Bengal, to talk to the only civil servant there whom I knew, that was, Debabrata Bandopadhyay, who had gone back to West Bengal as Land Reforms Commissioner, and was organising this operation, Barga camps<sup>75</sup>. Bandopadhyaya had noticed a tremendous increase in the member of women and children on these periodic treks and they all looked half-starved and the children looked even worse. Babies in arms. And when he had asked questions from district-level officer, the only answers he got in reply was that, "Yes, there is an increase, possibly because they want to go to Hoogly<sup>76</sup> and Burdwan where they can also shop,

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<sup>74</sup> S.N.D.T. Women's University—started in 1916 by Dhondo Keshav Karve as Indian Women's University at Pune with an enrolment of five students. In 1920, Sir Vithaldas Thackersey, an eminent industrialist and philanthropist of Mumbai who was also committed to the cause of women's education, offered a generous gift that became a turning point for the University. The University was renamed Shreemati Nathibai Damodar Thackersey Indian Women's University in memory of his mother. In 1936, the University shifted its headquarters to Mumbai. In 1951, the University was granted statutory recognition and from then on came to be known as Shreemati Nathibai Damodar Thackersey (SNTD) Women's University. Gradually, as the University progressed to newer heights, the acronym "SNTD" became popular and began to signify educational endeavours for women. Today, these letters - "SNTD" - have become a symbolic logo for excellent higher educational opportunities for women. (See website at <http://www.sndt.org/>)

<sup>75</sup> Barga camps—part of the land reforms initiative in the state of West Bengal in which the sharecroppers who cultivated land (*bargadar*) but were indentured to landlords (*zamindars* or *jotedars*) were registered as actual cultivators and provisions were made to distribute surplus land among them, rather than keep control in the hands of landlords who exploited the indentured sharecroppers. The camps for such registration by ILO representatives were called Barga camps.

<sup>76</sup> Hoogly—river and city in West Bengal, across the river from Kolkatta (Calcutta). The city is the site of a "factory" (warehouse and base) set up by the East India Company in 1640. Along the river there is a concentration of factories, which process cotton, rice, and jute, and manufacture rubber goods and chemicals. Hooghly was

and where they can see some cinema. Its not there in Bankura. They have no access to such things.” So it was against that backdrop, he had decided to hold this camp... During the three days of that camp, I was able to inform Ashok Mitra and Bandopadhyay that there is an old woman in that group who was sitting and, sort of, going on talking to herself in Santhali.<sup>77</sup> And I managed to get one of the other women who spoke Bangla more fluently that, “Can you tell me what she is saying?” And this old woman had linked up the whole cause of the decline in their situation with deforestation. “The forest gave us food, fodder, fuel as well as a livelihood. When they cut down the forests, they took away all these things and so we have to go on these perpetual treks just to save the children and those whom we try to save, we lose half of them in the process of these treks.” So this kind of information began to surface in their internal discussions before the camp even started.

And, that itself became another learning process, and before the camp ended, Benoy Choudhary, the Land Reforms Minister who was there right through listening, he called me, and he said, “Ashok Mitra tells me that you are coming to West Bengal to take up some kind of a project on rural women and you are looking for a location. *Aar Kothai Jabey, didi?*<sup>78</sup> This is where you start. You have just seen what condition these women are in. Where else will you go, sister? So make a beginning with this.”

So we began as assistance, to assist them, and it ended up as a partnership — and it is mutual learning, mutual empowerment process. That’s why I regarded that project always as my battery recharge. When I feel too jaded and sort of creeping, creeping hopelessness and powerlessness, I used to rush off there. It is still on, it has expanded — they have demonstrated their capacities, they have become some kind of a power in that region. And for the last seven years, I have been, with their help, I have been promoting similar groups in the neighbouring district, Medinipur. It’s been a very, very rewarding experience, which I have certainly described as a mutual empowerment process. Its not just the CWDS helping the women to empower themselves, but in the process this partnership has helped many in the CWDS to empower themselves, and first of all, me.

**Lakshmi: 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?**

Vina 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. I wouldn’t dare to predict for the 21<sup>st</sup> century because I am basically a 20<sup>th</sup> century person. I can only hope that in the same way that I hoped that the people of India will cope with all these challenges and rise to

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originally founded by the Portuguese in 1537. In 1651 it became the first English settlement in lower Bengal, while in nearby Chinsura the Dutch set up a trading post in 1656.

<sup>77</sup> Santhali—language and name of tribal people in West Bengal.

<sup>78</sup> *aar kothay jabey, didi*—(Bengali) where else would we go, *didi*. *Didi*, respectful form of address for an older sister or more generally while addressing women who are older in one’s society or community

the occasion, I have the same kind of hope from the women of India. You people have to carry on.