

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

**SITE: CROSS-SITE
(INDIA & UNITED STATES)**

**Transcript of Ruth Vanita
Interviewer: Jayati Lal**

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

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Ruth Vanita, born in 1955, is a professor of Liberal Studies and Women's Studies at the University of Montana, where she teaches courses in the Humanities and Literature on Shakespeare, Oscar Wilde, and Jane Austin; Women's Studies; Gender and Sexuality in 20th century fiction; and on same-sex love in western and Indian literary traditions. She was formerly a reader in English at Miranda House and the English department, Delhi University. She received her PhD in 1992 in English at Delhi University. She also received her MA and BA in English from Delhi University and Miranda House. From 1979 -1990 Ruth was active in the women's movement in Delhi. As one of the founding co-editors of *Manushi*, India's first feminist journal, she traveled to various cities, towns, and villages where she worked with women's groups conducting research on issues such as women's inheritance and land rights, marriage and dowry practices, and wife battering and murder. Ruth was also active in movements against communal violence. She is also the author and editor of many books including *In search of answers*; *Indian women's voices from Manushi*, *Sappho and the Virgin Mary: Same Sex Love and the English Literary Imagination*, and *Queering India: Same Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society*.

Jayati Lal is a faculty member in Sociology, Women's Studies, and South Asian Studies. Her teaching and research is interdisciplinary and is situated at the intersection of area and gender studies. Her research focuses on working class women who are factory workers in the garment and television manufacturing industries in Delhi. She has done extensive interviewing and ethnographic research in workers' homes and workplaces to capture the lifeworlds and subjectivities of 'factory women,' and their changing gender identities. She is currently completing a book length manuscript on this project.

Ruth Vanita Transcript

Jayati Lal: Ruth Vanita is professor of liberal studies and women's studies at the University of Montana where she teaches courses in the humanities and literature, Women's studies and gender and sexuality. She was formerly a reader in English at Miranda House and the English department at Delhi University. She received her PhD in 1992 in English in Delhi University. From 1979 -1990 Ruth was active in the women's movement in Delhi. As one of the founding co-editors of *Manushi*, India's first feminist journal, she traveled to various cities, towns, and villages where she worked with women's groups conducting research on issues such as women's inheritance and land rights, marriage and dowry practices, and wife battering and murder. Ruth was also active in movements against communal violence. She participated in Nagrik Ekta Manch's¹ work with victims of the 1984 Anti-Sikh riots in Delhi and was a member of a *Manushi* team that conducted a survey of and wrote a report on the Hindu-Muslim riots in Meerut in 1987. In 1991 she worked for the peaceful resolution of anti-reservation riots in Delhi. Vanita is the author of several books. In 1984 she co-edited with Madhu Kishwar *In search of answers; Indian women's voices from Manushi*, which was a collection of articles, letters and editorials from the first five years of the magazine's history. *Sappho and the Virgin Mary: Same Sex Love and the English Literary Imagination* was published in 1996. In 2000, she co-edited with Saleem Kidwai a foundational text in Indian Lesbian and Gay Studies, which covered writings on same-sex love from over 2000 years of Indian literature. And she recently edited *Queering India: Same Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society*, which examines a wide range of sources from film, literature, popular culture, historical and religious texts and the law, and covers a broad sweep of history from the age of the Kama Sutra in the 4th century AD to the 1998 film 'Fire'². Ruth is a published poet and has a collection of poems entitled *A play of light*. She's also translated many poems, short stories and articles from *Manushi*'s Hindi and English editions and has published English translations of contemporary Hindi novelists, Rajendra Yadav and Mannu Bhandari, and of the Rajastani fiction writer, Vijay Dan Detha.

Jayati: Hi. I'm Jayati Lal and we're here in Ann Arbor at the University of Michigan with Ruth Vanita. First, I just want to thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for the Global Feminism Project, Ruth, and to welcome you to Ann Arbor.

Ruth Vanita: Thanks.

Jayati: Now what we want to do today is basically talk for about an hour to an hour and a half, about your work, starting with the history of your engagement with the women's movement in India, and bringing it up to the current or the kinds of projects and work that you're involved in today. And I'd like to start first with some personal questions about your

¹ Nagrik Ekta Manch = regional/city unity organization/union. Nagrik Ekta Manch was a people's initiative and was born spontaneously out of the enormous outpouring of outrage at the genocidal killings and a desire to provide some form of relief. NEM became the hub of one of the most well organized, non-governmental relief and rehabilitation efforts in recent times.

² This controversial film by director Deepa Mehta opened in India in 1998. The film's protagonists are sisters-in-law, trapped in emotionally bleak marriages, who turn to each other for comfort, love and eventually, sex.

background and your history. Where were you born? Where did you go to school? Where did you grow up?

Ruth: I was born in Burma, and my family moved to India when I was about two. And I did primary and middle school at Springdale³, then my mother home-schooled me through high school. And then I went to Miranda House College⁴ for Women at Delhi University.

Jayati: So how long were you home-schooled?

Ruth: About two-three years.

Jayati: That's in high school?

Ruth: Yeah.

Jayati: And so you took your Board exams...

Ruth: Privately.

Jayati: ...privately. I didn't know that. So your family is, in terms of religious background, could you talk about that?

Ruth: My family is Christian of a very Puritan dissenting kind of sect. I'm now practicing Hindu, philosophically Hindu, but I'm influenced by Christianity. As Ashish Nandy⁵ says, you can belong to more than one community. I think I'm...

Jayati: So what sect when you say that they were...?

Ruth: Something like the Plymouth Brethren⁶. They don't have a name. But...

Jayati: Um-hum. And from both parents' side?

Ruth: Really from my mother's side, but my father joined that group.

Jayati: Um-hum. So growing up, were you speaking English at home?

³ A school in Delhi (<http://www.springdales.com/index.htm>).

⁴ One of India's leading women's residential colleges in Delhi University; founded in 1948

⁵ Ashis Nandy is a political psychologist and sociologist of science who has worked on cultures of knowledge, visions, and dialogue of civilizations. At present he is Senior Fellow and Director of the Center for the Study of Developing Societies and Chairperson of the Committee for Cultural Choices and Global Futures, both located in Delhi. Nandy has coauthored a number of human rights reports and is active in movements for peace, alternative sciences and technologies, and cultural survival.

⁶ The Plymouth Brethren are a Christian Evangelical religious movement that began in Dublin, Ireland and England in the late 1820s. The Brethren are divided into "Open Brethren" and "Exclusive Brethren." The Exclusive Brethren maintain a very isolationist and traditional view, with many of their children home schooled, a strict dress code for church meetings, and members commonly self employed or working for Christian organisations.

Ruth: Yeah. Speaking at English at home. My father's from South India, my mother's from the north, and we were speaking...

Jayati: So people don't tend to often realize that, that this sort of bilingualism often creates English as a language that you speak at home. So how is it then and when did your interest and expertise in Hindi grow? Because you speak not just Hindi, but Sanskrit very fluently to the extent that you actually do... translation work.

Ruth: Well, it is a second language at school, we learned it that way. But I just was more immersed in it than most...many kids are. And then in the BA, I took Hindi as a full-fledged language. I did the BA pass. And then with Manushi⁷, I did a lot of translation to and from Hindi to English. And then more recently, I've learned Urdu and now I'm...I've taken two years of Sanskrit. So, so it's just my own self education, but...

Jayati: So what was it like going from being home-school for your higher secondary, then to move to Delhi University to Miranda House in the 1970s?

Ruth: Well, it was a women's...it is a women's college, and it was very active. It was a lot of student activism, anti-beauty contest, all kinds of things like that. So I was on the fringes of that, but not very active in it. But I had close friends who were active in it. So it was an...it exposed me to Marxism. I became a Marxist. It exposed me to different kinds of reading and thinking so...

Jayati: So you went from then finishing your Masters Degree. Or finished your Bachelor's Degree and then you went straight to working for Manushi or were you in your Masters Program when you...

Ruth: Ah, no. I had just finished the MA, and I started teaching at Miranda House in '76. And I met Manu in '77 and we started a women's group which used to meet in my dorm room in Miranda House. And then about seven, eight months later we began to work on Manushi and the first issue came out in '79, January. So I was simultaneously teaching in Miranda House which was my paid job and working at Manushi, which was more than full time.

Jayati: So you finished. Though there was a period where, perhaps after your Masters, when you took a hiatus from academia and went full-time into Manushi work?

Ruth: No. I always taught at Miranda House. Manushi was unpaid. So I taught at Miranda House throughout that period, from 1976. For 20 years I taught at Miranda House in Delhi University. But technically I was an academic, but I wasn't doing much research. I'd started my Ph.D. in 1976-77, but I stopped doing it. Then I did law school for about a year and I just couldn't keep...do all of that. So I stopped doing it. So I didn't do much research or academic writing. I did a little, but not much because I was spending most of my energy on Manushi.

⁷ The word *Manushi* at its simplest was coined to mean the humane as well as the feminine principle in humanity. The first issue of the journal *Manushi* was officially released in January 1979. It is published by Manushi Trust as a non-profit, non-commercial Journal to give it an independent and stable economic base. Manushi was founded with the aim of finding effective solutions for the economic, political and social problems confronting India today and practices teachings from the life and work of Mahatma Gandhi.

Jayati: So Manushi was taking a lot of your time.

Ruth: Right.

Jayati: And when did you come to the U.S.? I'm sort of first trying to get a broad sense...

Ruth: Yeah.

Jayati: ...of what the time phases were and then we can go back into detail to the various sort of stages here.

Ruth: '93 I came for a conference. '94-'95, I spent at Cornell, and then '97 I moved for a job at one time.

Jayati: Um-hum. So what led to that decision? A lot of Indian academics in the U.S. often come after, or come for, graduate studies and then end up staying here to teach.

Ruth: Um-hum.

Jayati: For you it was somewhat different.

Ruth: Yeah. I could have come at that time. I probably would have, but I got involved in Manushi and in activism, and so I just got totally absorbed then. I didn't come to the U.S. I could easily have come immediately after the MA.

Jayati: Um-hum. And how do you think that sort of changed your life trajectory? Does it, the work that you've done...because the time that you spent with Manushi was significant.

Ruth: Yeah, I think I learned a tremendous amount from working at Manushi. I interacted with a huge spectrum of people from like printers and bookbinders in Old Delhi to village and slum women, to politicians, to women writers, to all, a whole range of people, whom I would never as a middle class girl have met this range of people. And I learned a lot of skills, like proof-reading and typing and editing and interviewing people, and just a whole range of things which I wouldn't have learned. I improved my skills in Hindi and in understanding India I think, and in society and culture. And I think my work even on same-sex love in India wouldn't have had the depth that it does if I had moved as a young person.

Jayati: That's interesting. So you've mentioned already that you had started a group, along with Madhu Kishwar⁸ who was your co-founder of Manushi while you were still in Miranda House. And the name of the group was Stree-Adhikar-Manch, right? The Forum for the Rights of Women. Could you talk a little bit about that, what you did? Because this was still while you were in college. It was based in Miranda House.

⁸ Madhu Kishwar is the co-founder and co-editor of Manushi. In addition to working together at Manushi, she and Ruth Vanita have also edited many books together. She has been campaigning for years for the rights of the poorest and least privileged women in India.

Ruth: Um-hum. I was just teaching. I started teaching in '76 in the same college where I was educated. It met in my dorm room and we did...we basically read the foundational texts of feminism -- Simone de Beauvoir, Frederick Engels, Kate Millet, and we had Florence Howe⁹. She happened to be visiting. We had various people come and talk to us – Vina Mazumdar¹⁰, Florence Howe. And when Florence described the American women's movement, I remember she mentioned the lesbian wing of it, and it was like, well, like a light bulb going off in my head, because I thought then that's the name of what I feel and that that's what it is. And we did a survey of women's and men's dorms on the campus to show the differences in conditions and in rules and in things like that. And then we got the idea of doing Manushi and that group kind of died, because then we went ahead and worked on Manushi.

Jayati: And basically took it outside the university.

Ruth: Yeah.

Jayati: Yeah. So in a sense if there were role models, or if I were to ask you...was there a particular experience or set of experiences that led you to start the women's group that then ends up becoming Manushi, what would you say it was? You talk about a light bulb moment, which is often the thing, you know, way it's talked about in the .. you know, the "Aha" moment. So you'd already had feelings of being different in terms of your sexuality and then had a name for it?

Ruth: Yeah. I had been in love with a woman when I was in the MA, but I just didn't...couldn't see it going anywhere. I wrote poems about it and stuff, so I had language for it, but I didn't have a name or a category. I couldn't see it moving towards a lifelong thing. So I still thought I would get married to a man, and so having a word and knowing that there are other people like that made a huge difference. In terms of influences, I saw myself as a Marxist at that time, which I of course later changed. But so that...so I wanted to do something. As a Marxist I wanted to do something, and what Madhu suggested was starting a women's group, which was not what I would have done. I was more interested in working in a trade union or something. And then my reading these texts, like Engels and de Beauvoir and so and I just began to see the point of that.

Jayati: So you spoke a little bit about the kinds of texts that you read in this group, which is an interesting mix, right, of sort of Marxist analysis. I don't think many groups in the U.S. would sort of read Engels as an avenue into feminism. Does that speak to the political climate at the time in the 1970s in India, or the sphere of sort of activism and politics in Delhi? It was also a very important moment around the post-emergency. Can you talk about that and how that might have affected your consciousness in the group that you were in Miranda House?

⁹ Florence Howe has devoted her career to the development of women's studies in the U.S. and internationally and to integrating new feminist scholarship into the core liberal arts curriculum. She is the Founder and former Director and Publisher of the Feminist Press at the City University of New York. In 1977, she was instrumental in creating the National Women's Studies Association, and in 1985 organized The Women's Studies International as part of the United Nations Mid-Decade Conference for Women in 1985, giving women from many countries their first exposure to women's studies.

¹⁰ For more information, see the Global Feminisms interview with Vina Mazumdar.

Ruth: Yeah. In that post-emergency¹¹ period a number of small...since the press had been shut down during the emergency...

Jayati: Could you talk a little bit about what the emergency was and when?

Ruth: It was something imposed by Indira Gandhi where she...where she shut down lots of civil liberties, and the freedom of the press was one of them. And so in the post-emergency period, a lot of small magazines and newspapers cropped up. Manushi was one of those, and there's a whole range of them. Like my uncle edited one called *Hamlet Studies* for many years, which is the only journal on Hamlet. And even that, he has seen it as a sort of the individual voice speaking. And, and I think Manushi was one of those. It was a whole ferment at the time.

Jayati: So we've already started talking about Manushi, and I wonder if you could tell us a bit more about it: just describe what it was, how it formed, what it's intent was. It's, you know, it was both a journal and much more than a journal. What were your goals?

Ruth: We wanted...one goal was to put women's issues on the political agenda of every party. At that time women's issues would appear as a sort of addendum and a manifesto way at the end of it. We wanted it to become a major political issue. I think...and we did help to do that. We wanted to change women's issues from being just...if you look at women's pages in newspapers and magazines at the time, they were just were beauty and cookery and things. And we wanted to bring in other...the issues of women's lives, material issues of women's lives, by having women speak, women who speak and write about their lives and their issues in Manushi. And I think Manushi had a huge effect in transforming mainstream media and women's media. Because now you can publish on say violence or sexuality or anything in any Indian newspaper or magazine. If you look at Feminine News Weekly they've really changed. And that is in response to things like Manushi. And now it paradoxically meant that a lot of women who did publish in Manushi now don't need to anymore, because now they can publish in the mainstream media.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Ruth: So Manushi served a certain purpose at a certain time, and I think now it doesn't have that key role that it had at the time.

Jayati: Could you tell me what Manushi means? And why you chose the name?

Ruth: It means...it comes from Manush, which means "human being" in Sanskrit and Sanskrit-based languages, but it's masculine, it's gendered masculine, so we're adding the "e" it becomes the female human being -- the human being, but the female human being. And it is a word, but not a

¹¹ This state of emergency refers to a period of governance under an altered constitutional set-up that can be proclaimed by the President of India when s/he perceives threats to the nation from internal or external sources or from financial situations of crisis. Under the advice of the cabinet of ministers and using the powers vested in the post, the President can overrule many provisions of the constitution which guarantee fundamental rights to citizens. In the history of independent India, there were three periods during which a state of emergency was declared The one being referred to here is the one declared between June 26, 1975 to March 21, 1977 under controversial circumstances of political instability under Indira Gandhi's prime ministership.

much-used word. It exists in dictionaries but it's not much used, and so it was seen as a sort of coinage, though it really wasn't an invention.

Jayati: So you...so it has very powerful influence, a long-lasting influence, in changing the kind of...the public sphere, really. But at the time, would you say that Manushi sort of marked a moment in the Indian Feminist Movement, really the rise of (or the birth of) what's been called variously the Autonomous Women's Movement, or the Independent Women's Movement? And who were the...who were your contemporaries at the time in terms of other organizations doing similar kinds of work?

Ruth: There were the women's wings of all the political parties, and there were social work type, charitable type women's organizations, like the Lion's Club, an old ladies' wing of it, which did social educational, charitable work, with a lot overlap with some of what the women's group did...groups did. And then soon after Manushi or almost at the same time, there were things like the FAOW¹² in Bombay. There was [inaudible], there were other groups in other parts of the country.

Jayati: So would you say though that...that this was a moment that you were sort of doing something that hadn't been done before, or would you say that in some ways you talked about how they are always, or there have been antecedents to this sort of work in terms of raising women's issues [inaudible] and other...

Ruth: Yeah, there are always antecedents. I won't say that anything is entirely new. But it was new form and a new...that the movement was taking. There were the...the 19th and early 20th centuries, there were the social reform movements, which concentrated on many of the same women's issues that the present movement does -- dowry¹³, violence, wife-beating, et cetera, education, women's education. And had some pretty amazing women activists who remained single, traveled across the world speaking and so on. So there's a lot of history that we didn't know about, but later came to know about. So...

Jayati: So how did this complicate the work of Manushi at the time? Here you are, a young organization, young in the sense of new, and you are entering a field that's already occupied, as you said, primarily by political parties. So could you kind of describe some of the work that you were trying to do in those early years and how, you know, your engagements with other people who are sort of doing women's issues was either complicated or not.

Ruth: Well, we intended just to bring out a magazine and we didn't know what that...and well, we knew nothing about bringing it out. It was...it turned out to be a tremendous task, just the mechanics of bringing it out with the kind of technology that was available to us, which was very low-grade technology -- manual typewriters and manual printing presses and things like that. But the minute

¹² Forum Against Oppression of Women.

¹³ Dowry is illegal in India. The Dowry Prohibition Act was originally passed in 1961 and amended twice in the 1980s. According to the Act, dowry is defined as "any property or valuable security given or agreed to be given either directly or indirectly by one party to a marriage to the other party to the marriage or by the parents of either party to a marriage or by any other person, to either party to the marriage or to any other person at or before [or any other time after the marriage] in connection with the marriage of the said parties."

(Source: <http://www.indiatogether.org/manushi/issue148/dowry.htm>; see this site for Manushi's take on and analysis of the Anti-Dowry Act.)

that the first issue came out and we had this little office that was also our home, it...we were flooded with women coming with all, basically with stories about domestic violence and wanting help. And also with volunteers, and...and people who just wanted information and tourists including foreign tourists coming in to talk about the women's movement. So we just had to deal with a whole range of things. We set up a legal advice cell. We started taking down the stories of women, and trying to help them out with their legal cases or negotiating with their families. And then we got suddenly a lot of contacts with activists all over the country in small towns and villages -- many of them men. They weren't just women. There were many of them men working on women's issues, or interested in working on them, who said, "Well, give me ten copies of Manushi, I'll sell it here. But this is our story of our organization and we are trying to do some of the issues." So we got in contact with a huge network of activists all over the country, who had very different political leanings from Gandhi¹⁴ and to socialist to different kinds of leftist, Maoist¹⁵, et cetera, varied opinions, big range.

Jayati: So you end up becoming not just a magazine but in some ways functioning as a crisis center, a legal aid center. And also it sounds like you become a node for a network; that you are sort of in some ways facilitating the formation of a network across a spectrum of parties around gender issues. How did, at that time, how did issues of gender [inaudible], culture and language impact the women's movement in India? Or maybe even specifically in Delhi, or you could talk about it in terms of Manushi in particular. That is, there are so many deep differences inherent in Indian culture, right? So how did you...Manushi see itself positioning itself vis-à-vis, you know, you...one notable feature is you're bilingual, so it was English and Hindi edition, which was a significant decision and quite hard to do, right?

Ruth: It was very hard. It involved a lot of translation, primarily from English to Hindi, because most of the writing that came in was in English. And when we did interviews of Hindi-speaking women, then we would transcribe it in Hindi or tape-record it in Hindi and transcribe it. Some writing did come in Hindi but most of it was in English, so then we had a full-time job of translating that into Hindi and publishing that. And then Hindi is only spoken in certain parts of the country. So of course there were requests from other places -- bring it out in Tamil¹⁶, bring it out in this and that. Which we were not at all equipped to do. But one thing that did happen is that groups or activities in other parts of the country, if they liked a particular article or essay, they would translate into their local language and print it as a newsletter or pamphlet, put it in the local press, whatever. And sometimes you would come to know about this use, sometimes we wouldn't. And that was fine, you know, because it was disseminating the ideas. It wasn't like we wanted to keep all the...a copyright or anything.

¹⁴ Gandhi was a major political and spiritual leader of India and the Indian independence movement. He was the pioneer and perfecter of *Satyagraha* — resistance through mass civil disobedience strongly founded upon ahimsa (total non-violence) which came to be one of the strongest driving philosophies of the Indian Independence Movement, and has inspired movements for civil rights and freedom across the world. Gandhi is commonly known and addressed in India and worldwide as Mahatma Gandhi.

¹⁵ Maoism is a variant of Marxism-Leninism derived from the teachings of the Chinese communist leader Mao Zedong.

¹⁶ Tamil is a classical language and one of the major languages of the Dravidian language family. Spoken predominantly by Tamils in India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and Singapore, it has smaller communities of speakers in many other countries. As of 1996, it was the eighteenth most spoken language, with over 74 million speakers worldwide. It is one of the official languages of India, Singapore and Sri Lanka.

Jayati: So Manushi says even today on their website that they work from a “people-oriented” perspective. And it also attempts to bridge the academic-scholar divide. So how do you think that actually worked? I mean, literacy in India is so low, right? Literacy rates. So who do you think the audience really ends up being? And how does...how does the magazine travel? And how does it reach...how does it become a people...how does it get to the people?

Ruth: Well, the primary audience of course is the literate and this...and then it, how does it get disseminated? If these people who are reading it, many of them were social workers, activists, local teachers, school teachers, whatever. Then they disseminate the ideas through their work, and the people that they are working with, and they implement it in their activism. They communicate with each other also in that way. In terms of academic scholar, the scholar and activist divide, yeah, and many times, like if we found the writings like of some major scholar really interesting, but it's written in a kind of language that's too difficult for a regular housewife or somebody to understand, and many times I have taken those articles, and I was the one who did a lot of this, and rewrote it in simpler language, then showed it to that person. And if it was okay with them, we published it in that simpler sort of format. We did a lot of that.

Jayati: And you also had conscious economic decisions, both in terms of pricing and where you got your funding from.

Ruth: Yeah. We decided at the start we took advertisements, and we...these advertisements were basically got from friends and acquaintances and family members, somebody in the tire business, and somebody with a bookshop. We'd get ads from them. They weren't going to get anything out of it. It was like a donation. And we collected subscriptions and individual donations, which ran out very fast, because we had collected too little. We had underestimated the price and the value. So then after about four issues, we decided to stop taking advertisements, because it was just too much energy being expended finding them and not bringing in much money. And we wouldn't take a certain kind of advertisement obviously. So then we just decided to raise the foreign subscription really high. And then we got a lot of foreign libraries and individuals subscribing, donating and so on. So I think basically what happened was that foreign and the library subscriptions subsidized the individual Indian subscriptions. And the English edition totally subsidized the Hindi edition. That was how the economics of it worked.

Jayati: So how do you think...if you were to describe the leadership of the magazine at the time, how would you describe it? What's the spectrum that you think you actually reached?

Ruth: Lots of academics. And academics doesn't mean just from big universities. It's in small colleges and Haryana¹⁷ and Southern University and Bengal, you know, small...small town colleges. Lots of, say, school teachers, social workers, political activists from right to left, I would say. Because it was a women's issue, it really does span that reach. We get...got opinions from sort of fairly right wing to fairly left wing and everything in between. And lot of housewives and educated housewives and students. A lot of my students at Miranda House became volunteers as well as readers and distributors and things like that.

¹⁷ Haryana is a state in north India and was part of the state of Punjab until 1966.

Jayati: So could you describe some of the issues that Manushi was involved in, and forced to become involved in when you are sort of almost treated as a legal aid center or as a crisis center, that ends up sort of becoming a voices also in the editorial positions that you take. Because they were issues that were very salient at the time in the women's movement. Could you give me some examples of issues that really you think were defining both for that moment and in Indian feminism? And I'm talking here, I'd say the early 80's or maybe through the 80's, because you were with Manushi...

Ruth: Um-hum.

Jayati: ...till 1990.

Ruth: Well, I knew women's movement has tend—I've written about this--has tended to focus very much on abuse and victimization and very little on pleasure and power and things like that. And in keeping with that, we focused on violence against women, on issues, legal issues and legal rights. Like not having certain legal rights, custody of children, wife-beating, wife-murder. Those were the issues being brought to us by women. And then a lot of poverty-related issues -- women having to collect fuel and water and food and spend their lives and their time and energy on those things. Employment, migration within the country, those were some of the issues.

Jayati: Was there something defining at that moment, that, you know, Manushi took a stance on that ended up becoming a contentious...either within the women's movement, or which you sort of initiated legal action on, on behalf of women who came to you, which also sort of spearheaded a movement or moment?

Ruth: Wife murder was a big one, which used to be called, or is still called dowry death. Which we later, Manushi later developed a perspective, which has been written about. But it's not just dowry death, it's wife murder, which is very often, for a whole range of reasons, including dowry but not restricted to dowry, which gets projects just as dowry death, because that's how it's legally defined. But anyway, wife murder and the violence leading up to it, because every murder is always preceded by a whole cycle of wife battering and abuse. That was a big issue. Rape to some extent around the Mathura rape case¹⁸ was an issue for a while. And the women's movement in general pressured the government to make the laws more punitive on rape and on dowry, on what they call indecent representation of women in advertisements...On that case, Manushi took a stance, a sort of a more freedom of speech stance against censoring all kinds of sexual materials, because that's a very harsh act, which censors all kinds of sexuality -- nudity, et cetera, et cetera, as pornographic.

¹⁸ In March 1972, Mathura, a 16-year-old tribal girl from Chandrapur district, Maharashtra, was taken to the police station by her brother and other relatives because they were concerned that she was under age and attempting to elope with her lover. The two policemen on duty said they wanted to record Mathura's statement when she was alone. They raped her while her relatives waited outside. The Sessions Judge held that since she had earlier eloped with her boyfriend, she must have been habituated to sex, and, hence could not be 'raped'. The High Court reversed the judgment, sentencing the policemen to six years in prison. In 1979, the Supreme Court again reversed the order. The judges felt that since Mathura had not raised any alarm, and since there were no visible injury marks on her body, she must have given her consent. The Mathura rape case galvanised the women's movement into asking for reforms of the criminal law that dealt with rape. In 1983, the government passed the Criminal Law Amendment Act, which created a rebuttal presumption in cases related to custodial rape. The government also made amendments stipulating that the penalty for custodial rape should not be less than seven years' imprisonment, and it provided for in camera proceedings and made the disclosure of the victim's identity a punishable offence. For more information see <http://www.hinduonnet.com/fline/fl2023/stories/20031121003109700.htm>

But allows, for instance, women to be shown as using detergents or being full-time housewives, because that's not indecent. And so we had some differences of opinion with other women's groups on that.

Some of the laws that Manushi specifically filed cases to change were enabling laws, like inheritance of land rights. And these laws have been changing slowly for women to inherit immovable property which would really empower them to the point where they wouldn't need a dowry. Because a lot of women see themselves as needing dowry that that's the only formal inheritance they get. Especially we filed a case for tribal women's lands right...land rights. Tribal women do most of the work in the economy but they don't own the land, because the land is supposed to belong to the tribe. In effect, it belongs to the men. That was one case. Another case we filed was for guardianship of small children. And over the age of five, the father was defined as the natural guardian in Hindu law, and so we filed a case on behalf of a woman who had two kids, whose custody was disputed.

Jayati: So when you say filed case [or] cases, this is to the Supreme Court?

Ruth: Yeah, these are public interest litigation cases in the Supreme Court, citing the one case but claiming that it affects a whole group of people.

Jayati: So where did you get the legal expertise? You were people who were putting out a magazine. How do you...? How does Manushi support...?

Ruth: We had lots of people offering...we had lots of volunteers coming in and out, coming and going, and not just Indian, also foreign, who used to come and work for three months, for six months, for two weeks, for one week, like that. We had two lawyers who came in, two women lawyers and came and offered to run a legal cell for us, and they helped us a lot. Plus we took advice. We would just go and consult any major lawyer, women and men. And they were all very open to helping and to giving advice, to helping draw up briefs, et cetera. But we had these two women who primarily helped run the legal cell or whatever it was.

Jayati: So you said, or you specifically mentioned like the tribal land rights and guardianship of children. Where are these cases now? Or do you know? Are they still, because...

Ruth: I know that the...they took years in court and after I left Manushi. Recently I had read about them. I think that both...the tribal land rights case was definitely lost because it involves the rights of the tribe and they don't want to turn it into individual property rights, even though the way it actually functions, it means that the men end up mortgaging the land and basically selling it. And the custody...that...the custody case I think was also lost in the form in which it was filed, it was lost. Though those laws are being modified otherwise by the legislature. But it was lost in court I think.

Jayati: So you call these issues that you've pursued legally as an attempt to get 'enabling laws' set into place. And you're contrasting these with more 'punitive laws'. So is the issue of dowry deaths or domestic violence one of the categories in which you would say that punitive laws have been sought by the Indian's movement? Could you talk about your analysis of that?

Ruth: Yes. We...it's very complicated and it's been written about in Manushi but...and elsewhere as well. There's a book by Veena Oldenburg¹⁹ called *Dowry Murder*, which lays out the issues quite well. But basically what the Indian Women's Movement did was to raise the punishment for giving and taking dowries. So more and more years of imprisonment and so on, which had no effect, because 99 percent of Indians, including the lawmakers and the police, do give and take dowry. And what happens is, when they're giving and taking it at the time of the marriage, they say this is just what we want to give. It's voluntary. Which is allowed. And then when they later, if they later have a fight or there's conflict in the family, then they redefine it in [inaudible] hindsight as dowry.

Jayati: Right.

Ruth: This is very convenient. And that's one thing. The other kind of punitive law was to say that just on the woman's say-so, if the woman just says they harassed me or abused me -- and abuse is very wide, it includes mental and emotional abuse -- you can arrest not only the man, but his mother, his father, his whole family and put them into prison without any other evidence except the woman's statement. And they have to then...the onus of proof is shifted onto them, which is never the case.

Jayati: Right.

Ruth: They have to...they're not innocent until proved guilty, they're guilty until they prove their innocence. And this is a very, very stringent law, and many people have written about how much it has been misused. There's no systematic statistics, but it really...we know from cases, most women's groups will tell you that it's been misused quite a bit. They might differ on the degree to which it's been misused, but that it is misused and it's open to misuse is definitely the case.

Jayati: So what would the alternative be? Because at the same time it's also possible that it's helped a lot of women.

Ruth: Um-hum.

Jayati: Like ... things like that rules for evidence were changed, right? So you can take...

Ruth: Right.

Jayati: ...a dying declarations, which wasn't possible previously, especially in the case of dowry deaths and burnings.

Ruth: Um-hum.

Jayati: So what other alternative would there be?

¹⁹ Veena Oldenburg is a professor of history at the City University of New York Graduate Center and Baruch College. Dr. Oldenburg has written on colonialism, courtesan life, and on *sati*, the act of Hindu widows immolating themselves on their husbands' funeral pyres—an issue that has been written about extensively by Indian feminist scholars.

Ruth: Well, the other alternative which one, she suggested now, later many academics like Veena Oldenburg suggested, is inheritance rights. That women will continue to want dowry. And many of my students whom I ask to write essays on dowry, said, "Yes, I will take it. Why should I not take it when my brothers are going to inherit the land, the house and everything..."

Jayati: Right.

Ruth: ...and this is the little bit I can get, why should I give I up, and marry without a dowry?" Which was what we had been advocating. The only way to end dowry really is to make inheritance absolutely equal, and also to empower women and give them agency, and mobility so that they are able to...so that before...before it comes to a mother, she's able to actually leave and live independently. This is extremely...

Jayati: Right.

Ruth: ...difficult for many women to live alone. So they have to go back to the father, the brothers, who send them back to the husband. So unless you break that cycle and this...and was not just employment, because so many of the women have been killed have been doctors, engineers and so...But even with housing, making...

Jayati: Right.

Ruth: ...housing, mobility and agency basically, and so much...

Jayati: Um-hum. So then you would...sorry.

Ruth: ...larger task than just changing a law.

Jayati: Right. You would then extend that analysis to domestic violence in general, just the specific analysis of dowry death ...

Ruth: Um-hum. And I think it applied to any country, yeah. To any group of women in any country. In the US if you are...I think wife battering is very widespread, but a few are going to end up dead it's because they are...they're able to leave and find a place to live, at least some of them are. And even here, we know how difficult it is from the refugees, wife battery...refugees, they go back home [inaudible], so...

Jayati: Um-hum. So these sorts of issues--just a small glimpse--give a sense of the way in which you may have been positioned differently vis-à-vis other groups, women's groups, in terms of your analysis of very difficult issues that were facing the movement at the time, such as dowry deaths. So how would you characterize it--if you think it's possible? Or, you know, could you speak to how...what Manushi's relationship was at that time that you were with it, to other groups, women's groups and organizations in Delhi? In a sense, how would you position Manushi vis-à-vis the women's movement more broadly?

Ruth: We did a lot of joint actions, particularly like International Women's Day²⁰ marches, and protest demonstrations against the police, and particular harassment cases, or against families in particular. So we did a lot of joint actions. We had some differences of opinion on issues, like as I said the Indecent Representation of Women Act²¹, or whether marriage—one was under the attitude of a breakdown of marriage, whether...if one party feels that the marriage has broken down completely, should they be able to get out of it or not? And in India you cannot unless both the parties agree, you can't get out of it. So we know women who've been 17 years married to one man, living with another, but cannot get out of it because he doesn't let you divorce him. So we thought that that should be possible. Many of the women's groups thought it would be used against women by men and therefore it shouldn't be forced. So we had differences of opinion of that type, and we sometimes public different points of view in Manushi around these, some of these issues. There were also lots of personality conflicts and political...political differences as well as personality conflicts, between, not just between Manushi and other groups but between other groups too. So I think movement's pretty...I think like most movements, it's pretty flawed.

Jayati: How would you describe Manushi? Would you...would you describe Manushi as a feminist magazine? And why or why not? I mean, and I ask this particularly because of course we know that Madhu at least has come out in a 1990 article which is entitled, "Why I Do Not Call Myself a Feminist" and her sort of take is ...against "isms" in general. But if you think about the work of Manushi and reflect on that, would you say it was a feminist organization, and why?

Ruth: It's a question of how you use language and I...when Madhu wrote that article, it went through many drafts that I'd commented on in detail, and she did change it. But I still differ with her on it because you...language cannot be controlled by individuals. So even if Manushi was never called a feminist magazine, we never...said a 'journal about women and society'. But it was called feminist by others, and I think in common understanding it is feminist. And so if you just keep saying, "I'm not, I'm not, I'm not," if other people are going to call you that and your work is that. It is feminist in effect, because language can't be controlled by you. It's in social circulation. So that extent, yes. I would say it is feminist.

Jayati: And yet you've described an organization that was very flexible and not dogmatic at all, in terms of the way you both (representing your editorials) represented a spectrum of positions.

Ruth: I wouldn't say that entirely. It wasn't always the case. Like it depends on the issue. But on certain issues, ah, Manushi would do now, especially, it takes very clear-cut positions, say, for

²⁰ International Women's Day (8 March) is an occasion marked by women's groups around the world. This date is also commemorated at the United Nations and is designated in many countries as a national holiday.

²¹ The 'Indecent Representation of Women Act' was passed in 1986. Along with the Information Technology Act, it bans the indecent representation of women in any form of media, including print and electronic.

reservations for women²², but for reservations for other backward caste²³. So if you had an anti-reservation for the backward caste position, they wouldn't publish that. So they...it's pretty clear positions too on several issues.

Jayati: Hm. So you started working on your Ph.D., while you were at Manushi, and you...at that point also you switched to...you leave Manushi about the same time. So was it the appeal of academia, or a statement about your disenchantment with the work that you had been doing? With activism in general? With Manushi in particular? With the women's movement at the time? What sort of issues, or what was missing in the work that you were doing at Manushi that led you to sort of decide to go back to academia and pursue a Ph.D.?

Ruth: Yeah, I would say two things were missing. One was sexuality and the other was depth. When you're writing a magazine that is for a general audience, it was there, not an academic journal, you're writing for a general audience, the women's movement in general tends to always simplify and sort of talk down. It's run by middle and upper class women mainly, at least in the big cities. And it's never about their own issues. It's almost about the issues of victimized women. For instance, lesbianism was...I now know that many of the leaders of those autonomous women's groups were either lesbian or bisexual and were actively talking about it among themselves. But in the public, when we came together as groups, you would never talk about it. One conference that we went to in 1980, there was a woman, an Indian woman from England visiting, and she was an open lesbian, they only "out" one. And I went and came out to her, and she told me that any number of women had come out to her, because she was a safe person going back to England, but had not talked to each other. And that has...that has still not been acknowledged-- the amount of lesbian energy that went into the movement in the '70s and '80s. And now in the '90s it began to be acknowledged, and now some of the groups are talking about it. But at the time it was very shutdown, it was very afraid of being labeled lesbian and therefore Westernized and so on. So there was a very limited amount of writing about sexual issues that we could do and at Manushi it was seen as a self-indulgent thing that the West does. And it's not just Manushi, but the women's movement in general: that that's not an important issue for Indian women who are dying of malnutrition or amniocentesis or whatever, and so we don't have the luxury to think about sexuality. And I found that very constraining, because I had to sort of...I didn't come out for various reasons, but this was definitely one of them, that my persona was tied up with that of Manushi, and so it would label Manushi. And that was the fear at least. I don't know if it would have, but...And relatively academia was a freer space, even in India. Whatever I published very early while I was working at Manushi, an article on the female-female relationship in 'As You Like It'²⁴. And it was very well received in Delhi University by my teachers who were just regular, good old liberal

²² Reservation in Indian law is a term used to describe policies applied to government aided educational institutes, and in the government or public sector, to ensure that a portion of job positions or college seats are set aside or *reserved* for a given group. This is not the same as Affirmative Action programs, such as in the U.S., where the amount of concessions to be made in order to increase representation in an underrepresented group is at the discretion of individual organization. The reservation system in India is based on statutory quotas that must be met. In 1992, the 73rd Amendment required that one third of seats at all levels of all Panchayat councils (local governing bodies) be reserved for women. Panchayats are responsible for the administration of local public goods.

²³ Ruth is probably referencing "Other Backward Classes" (OBC) here. In the constitution, OBCs are described as "socially and educationally backward classes." It is also a census classification, and is often used when referencing reservations for scheduled castes, tribes, and OBCs. OBCs are entitled to 27% reservations in public sector employment and higher education.

²⁴ William Shakespeare's *As You Like It*.

people. They were not feminist or Marxist or anything. And they received my book very well. So I was...I felt much freer. There was a paradoxically kind of liberation there.

And the second thing was that the kind of writing and research done at Manushi was...it didn't allow for depth. Just in terms of time and energy, I had no time to learn a language, no time to really read very much. That always a sort of reaction to the issues of the moment. And whatever depth there was, was through interviewing somebody, that we would interview people in depth. But that, but that's limited. That was, in terms of looking at the past, we did one issue on women devotee...[Bhakti] poets, the Tenth Anniversary issue,²⁵ and that was the most...one of the most satisfying things I did because I'd read a lot of poetry written by medieval women poets, and wrote about it. But it was again, we had to go into the next issue and the next issue of the magazine. So one couldn't spend months, years or even months researching one thing and finding out its roots.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Ruth: And I just, after 13 years of doing Manushi, I just needed that different kind of intellectual satisfaction. And emotional, so...

Jayati: Yeah, thank you. So you end up going to the academy and we'll talk about your academic work in a little bit, but I also want to ask you the question I've asked you about Manushi more directly. And that is, how do you understand the term feminism? And what has it meant to your own work?

Ruth: Like a lot of terms, it's kind of...it...well, unlike, say, Marxism or Gandhianism, where there is, there is a sort of text, and there is a minimal position you can say all Marxists have to take, or all Christians have to take, let's say, but it's not the case with feminism, because you can...you can think that women should stay home and be good mothers and should be rewarded and acknowledged for that, and you could think that women should be presidents or should be...or you can think...you can be against abortion or for it. You can...and you still call yourself a feminist. So it really is whatever you make of it, and whatever...if you say you're a feminist, you are and other people may say you are not. So it's a completely open and completely contestable term. And to that extent I don't find it very useful. I don't use it in my writing or anything. But definitely I am a feminist—I will be seen as a feminist. I won't say, no I'm not. Because I'm working on issues of women and gender and sexuality. That's most of my work has been on that, so it's kind of silly to say that I'm not.

Jayati: Right. So...so it's...you're right. It's a very difficult term to pin down when a whole spectrum, a wide spectrum of people from very political backgrounds want to claim it, but maybe one way to think...I'm trying to think about you in relationship to your work, how has it influenced your work? Do you see feminism either as a politics or as a genre...you know, as sort of intellectual body of thinking? You know, that...really deeply influences the way you think about the work that you are doing.

²⁵ See: *Manushi: Tenth Anniversary Issue, Women Bhakta Poets*. No.s 50-52. 1989. (<http://www.manushi-india.org/manushi-publications.htm>)

Ruth: Yes, it definitely does, because once you start noticing gender and sexuality, then you see it everywhere, whether I was teaching Shelley²⁶, or whether I was reading a newspaper or talking to my students, I just see the impact of gender everywhere. The impact of sexuality and of gender, because so then it just enters your discourse, and once it's entered, you can't get it out again, and once you've opened it up, you just see it everywhere and things you may not have noticed otherwise. So to that extent, yeah.

Jayati: So you've said that others may call you a feminist, but would you call yourself a feminist?

Ruth: I've never had occasion to. I mean, I wouldn't say I'm a feminist. Why would I? Because I was just talking about issues.

Jayati: Earlier in the interview, you claimed a label that I was little surprised about. You said, "I was a Marxist."

Ruth: Um-hum.

Jayati: So if you were to give yourself a label--and we know how problematic labels are--either politically or in terms of what you think to be most central to your politics at this time, what...how would you describe yourself?

Ruth: I don't know. I would say I'm influenced by many things, you know. I'm influenced by...I've been influenced by Marxism certainly, by anarchism certainly, by feminism, by...I am a lesbian, and I'm influenced by Christianity, by Hinduism. So I'm influenced by Gandhi's writings, by...so influenced by a range of things. I wouldn't say that I'm just Gandhian, even though I agree with many things he said, I disagree with many others, so...

Jayati: You don't want to beat them down. You've talked about your lesbianism and...and could you tell me more ... what is the genealogy of your coming out in relationship to the work that you were doing? Or is this something that happened much later? What about your family?

Ruth: Yeah, I came out to my mother in about 1995. And we had a discussion about it which was fairly calm. But then she sort of had an amnesia about it and had...and seemed to have forgotten and had to be told several different times. And there have been various conflicts about it too. But now they've pretty much accepted it. I came out to Madhu of course, and other colleagues at Manushi. Then I found a group of gay friends around early 1989, '90. I met a group of gay friends who were separate from Manushi, and I kept them entirely separate and lived this sort of two lives. I met my girlfriend separately and did Manushi work separately. They were outside the women's movement, and so I came out to them in that sense I corresponded with...I've been corresponding with Ashok Row Kavi of 'Bombay Dost'²⁷, those for a long time. I was reading 'Bombay Dost' while I was at Manushi.

²⁶ Maybe referring to Mary Shelley, author of *Frankenstein*

²⁷ Ashok Row Kavi, is a well-known gay activist in the Indian AIDS struggle. Kavi is the editor of *Bombay Dost* ("Bombay Friend"), which is described as "the first legally registered publication to focus exclusively on the issues

Jayati: Um-hum.

Ruth: And Trikone²⁸ and all the lesbian stuff that came out of the US and was sent to India. I was reading that. I was collecting, while I was at Manushi, I was cutting out from newspapers and collecting every single thing that appeared on homosexuality. I was collecting books. And all of that went into 'Same-Sex Love in India'; the collection that I had, and Saleem had been doing the same thing. So I had it on my mind a lot, and I was working on Virginia Woolf, again on sexuality. So I was reading all of that. So I was doing a lot of reading. And through my academic work, I was...I was in a way coming out to my colleagues at Delhi University. But in a way not, because later, when I got married to a woman in 2000, some of them, though they had read all my work, claimed to be totally surprised. So they didn't...they thought I was working on it, but perhaps wasn't living it or something [inaudible].

Jayati: That's a really great commentary, both about the...well, the ways in which people just don't see what's in front of them when they don't...don't want to. Also about the way in which at that time, there was really not much of a field of gay-lesbian activism in India. You've mentioned a couple of groups that were Bombay-based. In Delhi, these groups hadn't really started. And this is really very striking about your work: your academic work and writing has really been very much engaged with recovering the history of what you call the tolerance towards same sex love in the Indian context in a really broad historical sweep, from ancient to medieval and on to modern texts and histories.²⁹ And how does this focus on recovery, as you talked about the archive that you and Saleem kept, end up becoming the book? How does this link up with your work outside the academy? So do you see the sort of work that you're doing in producing these texts: is it mostly archival, is it academic, is an activist interest, or is this where it all comes together?

Ruth: Well, it's giving us background history. Like when I was a student at Delhi University, we were taught, say, E. M. Forester and W. H. Auden, with absolutely no gender-sexuality reference. We weren't made aware that, say, Auden's love poems are to men. And so given...and if we had been made aware, then it wouldn't have made me feel that so isolated as the only one, sort of...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Ruth: And then when I did my work, my students came out to me at Delhi University. They would...so they...So...and now they're...in many Delhi University Colleges they are organizing, they are talking about these issues, they are putting up exhibits and so on, so forth. So, you know, if you have no past, then I think you have no future. People that don't have a past, don't have a future, and we...we were constantly told, well still, there's this myth that homosexuality is an import item from West Asia or from Europe, which is entirely untrue, but we didn't have the evidence to show that

that confront gays, lesbians and bisexuals and is one of the few resources in India for homosexual AIDS education." (Source: <http://www.ashoka.org/fellows/viewprofile3.cfm?reid=96933>)

²⁸ Trikone is an organization for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people of South Asian descent. It was founded in 1986 in the San Francisco Bay Area, and claims to be the oldest group of its kind in the world. The organization publishes a quarterly magazine, See <http://www.trikone.org/>.

²⁹ Ruth Vanita, "Preface," pp.xiii-xxiv in *Same Sex Love in India, Readings from Literature and History*, edited by Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai (Palgrave, 2000).

it's untrue. So it's really important to present that evidence. And that's what Saleem and I were trying to do.

Jayati: In a sense it's a really foundational text for Indian Lesbian and Gay Studies. There was really nothing comparable at the time.

Ruth: Um-hum. No, there were a couple of popular books -- *The World of Homosexuality*³⁰ by the mathematician Shakuntala Devi. Popular book interviewing a couple of people and writing about the issues and the issue of civil rights and so on. There was a little report called "Less Than Gay," brought out by ABVA, which is an anti-AIDS group, and that again was on the status of gay people at present in India. No, there was no...there was...there were a few academic essays by...which were better than journals here and there, on very specific issues, like on pederastic love in Urdu literature³¹, or something like that, very specific. And not accessible to most people. So I think this book was intense. It does work as a resource, because there's so much more research that can be done if you look at what's in the book, this...it's a path, gateway to a whole lot of material that's out there, I'm sure in many other Indian languages.

Jayati: You talked before to me about a group that you started after leaving Manushi that was linked more directly with archival work?

Ruth: Yeah. A bunch of us started a group called DARE, it was 'Documentation Archive Research Education', and was intended to be like a resource basically, an archive of gay-related materials. And we would...we would...Saleem and I would put our materials in that. But then I left the country and it sort of fell apart. There weren't too many people who could put a lot into...quite a lot of time and energy to be put into it. And so nothing happened on that score. And then the gay movement took off basically...Bombay Dost already was in existence but all the other groups came into existence post the HIV-AIDS problem and they got huge amounts of funding, foreign as well as governmental, to do that. And then those anti-AIDS groups became the spaces where gay issues could be talked about basically. That gave the moment a big [push] And there now are lesbian groups as well in Bombay and Delhi and Kerala and Madras and all these places.

Jayati: So how would you characterize the relationship or the response by the Indian women's movement and various women's groups that you were in contact with in Delhi? When this activism starts coming into play in terms of sexuality?

Ruth: Um-hum. Well, it has been very mixed and very up and down and back and forth. It's certainly now after 10 years or after the '90s, after 10 years or so now, there's at least at the women's conference, at the big women's annual conferences, they'll have one workshop on lesbianism or some on sexuality or something like that. There are some little groups, autonomous women's groups, funded groups, NGOs, who like TARSHI³² and so on which do sexuality

³⁰ Mathematician Shakuntala Devi, in her 1977 book, *The World of Homosexuals*, interviewed Srinivasa Raghavachariar, head priest of the Srirangam temple. He said that same-sex lovers must have been cross-sex lovers in a former life. The sex may change but the soul retains its attachments, hence the love impels these souls towards one another.

³¹ Urdu literature is a popular form of poetry and short stories in India.

³² TARSHI is a non-governmental organization in Delhi that works on sexuality, sexual and reproductive health, STDs and HIV/AIDS and sexual abuse.

workshops for rural women or for women in general. But the big women's groups, like the political parties' women's wings, are still in denial. For example, for the last few years in the march, the International Women's Day marches, there has been this huge conflict that should the Lesbian groups be allowed to March with banners that say Lesbian on them as part of their name. Or shouting any slogans related to that. And the CPM Women's Wing, which brings a big contingent, absolutely said no to scandalize all working class women and it would project the wrong image. So you can march as a group, but not carry a banner that any such word on it. Interestingly, the government sponsored them, the women's exhibit on March 8, happily allowed them to have a booth with the name on it. So the debate is still going on and within the CPM Women's Wing³³, I know there are many people who are for it, but they have to argue with the whole party hierarchy. And still a tremendous distrust and fear basically of being labeled as anti-men, man-hating and so on, which women's movement has generally dealt with in India right from the start. And lesbian just sort of adds to that, so they don't want that labeling. I wouldn't say they're very welcoming too. But I think they're being pushed, especially now by younger women, and they're having to cede some space. So the "Fire"³⁴ debate, for example, all the groups did come out in defense of the movie's right to be shown.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Ruth: So that was a good thing.

Jayati: So it's just sort of a two prong response on the part of the Marxist parties that it's not as important as issues of class, or dealing with the working class.

Ruth: Yeah, I believe, yeah.

Jayati: And then that sort of falls into a discourse also about it being Western. Right?

Ruth: Um-hum.

Jayati: And this sort of leads into my other question. You've mentioned in your writing, specific reasons for why you prefer to use the term "Lesbian-Gay Studies" rather than sort of...rather than "Queer". Could you talk about that? And yet you...in your second book, is "Queer," has "Queer" in the title.

Ruth: The second book is a collection of essays in which many writers were using the word "queer" and that's the only title the publisher could come up with. I couldn't come up with anything else...

Jayati: Um-hum.

³³ Communist Party of India (Marxist)

³⁴ This controversial film by director Deepa Mehta opened in India in 1998. The film's protagonists are sisters-in-law, trapped in emotionally bleak marriages, who turn to each other for comfort, love and eventually, sex.

Ruth: ...so it was fine. I...in my own work I don't use it, because I think it's too broad a term. It could encompass everything from pedophilia to heterosexual sadomasochism to, you know, any kind of fetish, and so on. It is not at all specific. And secondly, I don't like its negative connotation, because it still very much has that, especially in India, and even here, I think it still hasn't lost its connotation of being really strange and weird. Like for my mother, for instance, for her to say queer and think of anything queer as positive would be extremely difficult. Whereas gay at least sounds positive in terms of what it means in the language.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Ruth: And I like the history of lesbian too, connected to Lesbos³⁵ and so on. Whereas queer has nothing positive about it that I can see, unless...except what you put into it.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Ruth: But it has nothing in terms of the history or the cultural connotation, which you can't entirely shed. So that's the reason for that. Yeah.

Jayati: Um-hum. Well, you've already mentioned the film "Fire" and it really has been a very important, as a turning point in politics in the Indian context. In fact, in discussing the reception of Deepa Mehta³⁶ 1998 film "Fire", you've said that you...you think that it really initiated the first public debate on homosexuality in India. And I'd like to quote from something that you've written. You've said that it's, and I quote, "It is impossible and entirely futile to separate the "Western" from the "Eastern" in the modern world and in modern India. This inseparability is demonstrated by the fact that all the Indian lesbians whose weddings have been reported (and this is in the press) so far are non-English speaking, lower-middle class women, unconnected with the supposedly "Western" phenomenon of the feminist or gay movements in Indian cities."³⁷ I wonder if you could elaborate for us on your assessment here. What it is that you're trying to sort of unpack?

Ruth: Um-hum.

Jayati: And both in your sort of discussion of "Fire", and if you could lay out for us why that was so significant in terms of the responses to it and the debate that followed.

Ruth: Well, I've argued in many different essays that ideas circulate, and even in the pre-modern past from the ancient to the present, ideas have been circulating between so-called East and so-called West, depending on how you draw those lines anyway. They're arbitrary. Ideas have been

³⁵ Lesbos is a Greek island located in the northeastern Aegean Sea; its inhabitants are called *Lesvioi*. The word "lesbian" is derived from the Victorian interpretation of the poems of Sappho whose poetry was taken to mean sexual rather than emotional or platonic love between her and other women. Because of this association, Lesbos and especially the town of Eressos, the birthplace of Sappho, are visited frequently by lesbian tourists to this day.

³⁶ Deepa Mehta is an Indian born film director and screenwriter who is now based in Toronto.

³⁷ Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai, "Introduction: Modern Indian Materials," pp. 191-217 in *Same Sex Love in India, Readings from Literature and History*, (Palgrave, 2000): 215.

circulating. An example would be Thoreau and Emerson and so on who read the Bhagavad Gita³⁸ and it shapes their Transcendentalism³⁹. Then Gandhi reads Thoreau and is highly influenced by him. Then Martin Luther King reads Gandhi and is influenced by him. So these are circulation's and they're good. Circulation is a good thing, and whether it's a good or bad thing, you can't stop it. So to kind of be...this post-Colonialist anxiety about shutting out everything Western is unrealistic. It can't be done. I can't shut out all the Western influences from my family, from my reading, from my education, et cetera, without killing myself. I can't do it. So it's a silly idea to think that just removing fem—not using the word feminism or not using the word lesbian will somehow make me more indigenous or more Indian or whatever that is. And Indian culture particularly has been so assimilative. It's assimilated every culture from around the world. Why shouldn't it assimilate present-day modern influences too? And I think from a position of...I have a feeling of more confidence about Indian culture and its ability to, to retain it's own selfhood, whatever that is...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Ruth: ...while absorbing Western influences. And I can see that even in things like McDonald's in India...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Ruth: ...is a very different thing from McDonald's here. It has a sign saying "No beef and pork served on these premises," and it has ten vegetarian offerings.

Jayati: Maha-burgers.⁴⁰

Ruth: So it has become something different, which I think it hasn't necessarily in every country that it has gone to. It's in India that this significant change occurs. And in terms of "Fire", yeah, one of the main criticisms of "Fire", even by Madhu Kishwar and Manushi and by many people was that it's a Western view, because she lives in Canada.

³⁸ The Bhagavad Gita ("the song of the Divine") is an ancient Sanskrit text comprising of some 700 verses from the epic work known as Mahabharata (*Bhishma Parva* chapters 23 – 40). The content of the Bhagavad Gita is a conversation between Krishna and Arjuna taking place on the battlefield of Kurukshetra just prior to the start of a war. Responding to Arjuna's confusion and moral dilemma, Krishna explains to Arjuna his duties and elaborates on number of different Yogic and Vedantic philosophies, with examples and analogies. This has led to the Gita often being described as a concise guide to Hindu philosophy. During their conversation, Krishna reveals his identity as the Supreme Being Himself (Bhagavan), blessing Arjuna with an awe-inspiring glimpse of His divine absolute form.

³⁹ Transcendentalism was a group of new ideas in literature, religion, culture, and philosophy that emerged in the New England region of the United States in the early-to mid-nineteenth century. It is sometimes called "*American Transcendentalism*" to distinguish it from other uses of the word *transcendental*. It began as a protest against the general state of culture and society at the time, and in particular, the state of intellectualism at Harvard and the doctrine of the Unitarian church which was taught at Harvard Divinity School. Among their core beliefs was an ideal spiritual state that 'transcends' the physical and empirical and is only realized through the individual's intuition, rather than through the doctrines of established religions. The publication of Emerson's 1836 essay *Nature* is usually taken to be the watershed moment at which Transcendentalism became a major cultural movement. Emerson closed the essay by calling for a revolution in human consciousness to emerge from the new idealist philosophy.

⁴⁰ 'Maha-burger' literally translated means Big Burger. It is available on the MacDonal'd's menu in India (with lamb rather than beef), and suggests an effort to translate the "Big Mac" into a local idiom.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Ruth: And so you're kind of damned if you live somewhere else, though she was brought up in Delhi and she's entirely Indian. I think that's a sort of, not a very useful criticism to make, because the point is, is the text useful?

Jayati: Right.

Ruth: Where she lives is kind of irrelevant to me. And there's a basic heterosexism and defensiveness about sexual issues which then is expressed in the whole question of Westernization. Because I went to a feminist retreat in India in 2000...around 2001, and some very prominent feminist academics there, including historians, were basically saying... Okay, I was presenting *Same-Sex Love in India* materials, and they were saying, "Well, what's the use of talking about same-sex love in the past in India? This might only strengthen the Hindu Right if you say good things about Hindu texts. And anyway, what's the use? Talk about civil rights now if you want to, but what's the use of talking about the past? Which is a strange thing for a historian to say. And they certainly wouldn't say it if you were writing about the family or marriage. Also the kind of thing about...don't use terms like lesbian and gay because they're Western terms.

Jayati: Hm.

Ruth: Well, what about using terms like family and marriage and man and woman?

Jayati: Right.

Ruth: Are there Hindi equivalents of...for these? The Sanskrit equivalents of these are not exactly the same thing. When you say "*parivar*" and you translate that as family, it's not exactly the same thing, but we do it.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Ruth: It's not possible to use a language. I mean, you'd have to stop...

Jayati: Right.

Ruth: ...English entirely. And even then, Hindi has absorbed a lot of English words. Like television.

Jayati: Right.

Ruth: Now if you say *doordarshan*,⁴¹ or invent some word, it still doesn't mean that it's entirely non-Western. Parliamentary democracy is Western, Marxism is Western. So it's a little funny to get

⁴¹ *Doordarshan* literally translates into long-distance or far-away reception, and is used to refer to television broadcasts. The state-owned TV channel is also called Doordarshan. More popularly, "television" has entered the Hindi language.

so anxious about the 'Western' when it comes to feminism or homosexuality. And homosexuality in particular which is not Western at all in its...in its practice.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Ruth: The weddings we were talking about...

Jayati: And have the representation...

Ruth: ...have been a series of weddings over the last two decades in India, in various different parts of India...

Jayati: Right.

Ruth: ...between lower middle class, mostly Hindu women. Some of them conducted by Hindu priests with family support. And that's one of the things that I'm writing about in the current book, which is called *Love's Rite* and...

Jayati: Yes, I'm sorry I mispronounced that.

Ruth: Well, that's okay sort of play on the word, and it's from Shakespeare's Sonnet, "The Perfect Ceremony of Love's Rite." And so that's interesting that the idea of marrying one another occurs to these women and that it's accepted by their local communities, even though it's not legal.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Ruth: And that the same idea occurs to people here, because it seems to me that I know universal is a very bad word. But--it's now an unfashionable word--but falling in love and wanting to make a public commitment and a sanctified commitment is something fairly cross-cultural, and it doesn't have to be imported from one place to another. It's what occurs to people to do. And it has antecedents in Indian texts which are marriage-like unions, and it has antecedents in European texts too, which many scholars have shown. So I'm interested in these similarities and connections, and not just in emphasizing only the differences.

Jayati: So if I were to take the standpoint of this Marxist or, you know, some political party women's wing person, and say, "Well, these marriages, these same-sex marriages that are talked about in the Indian press of these lower middle class women, Hindi-speaking women, aren't really lesbian relationships. They're just sort of...they're a critique of patriarchy and an escape from patriarchy."

Ruth: Um-hum.

Jayati: And so that the sanction that they get from their family isn't really the same...the sanction of sort of 'knowing it,' or it doesn't articulate as romantic or sexual love. How would you respond to that?

Ruth: Well, I would respond by saying that the newspaper reports, when they actually interview these women, the women very clearly say, “I love her and I feel in love with her and I want to live with her.” They are using the word “love” and love at least is a word that translates fairly easily. Now they are not using the word lesbian for themselves.

Jayati: Right.

Ruth: But it’s, like Madhu’s saying she’s not a feminist. You know, it’s the word that if you’re going to speak English, that’s the word you would use. If you...if it’s the word that you’re going...if you’re going to speak Hindi, then you say, “I love her and I want to marry her.” That’s enough. That communicates the message. You don’t need to say ‘lesbian’. But there’s no harm in saying lesbian if I’m writing about it in English. That’s what I think. And it’s like me before I had the word lesbian. But then the word...and I found the word lesbian in English, I won’t say, “No, I won’t use it because it’s an English word,” when I’m using every other word in English, you know, so, I don’t see this as a...it’s not to me a major issue.

Jayati: You’ve also noted in your writing that a lot of these photographs note or show one person dressed as more masculine...

Ruth: Um-hum.

Jayati: ...in the couple, which also speaks to more than just sort of, you know, two people trying to sort of escape from patriarchal unions. I want to shift gears now and ask you to talk about more your creative writing. I mean, one of the things that’s absolutely fascinating about your work is that it spans such an amazing spectrum. You know, from translation, which you do a lot of, from regional, mostly Hindi to English and back, to academic. But also your creative writing. And I wonder if you could read a couple of poems for us? I was going through your poetry and even there, there’s this amazing spectrum of the kind of issues that you deal with, both from very political references and events to more of romantic sort of self inward-looking romantic poetry--love poetry. When did you first start writing poetry? I wonder if you could tell us about that.

Ruth: I started very young, early teens, maybe. Very young. But I’ve stopped now -- this is interesting. And that most of these poems were written as a part of a huge body that...of poetry that I just wrote between say, 1990 and ’93, after I left Manushi. It was like this late-blooming and dealing with personal life, which I had kind of shut down for the years I was at Manushi.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Ruth: So that’s the book that came out of that period. And then once I...after ’94, ’95, I basically stopped writing poetry, I don’t write anymore.

Jayati: So that’s interesting. So when you wrote, you wrote in English.

Ruth: Yeah.

Jayati: Yeah, always in English.

Ruth: Um-hum.

Jayati: Could you read a couple of poems for us? I was wondering if you could maybe read something that was more political and tell us about them, what the referents are and what the meaning is?

Ruth: Okay. So this poem was in 1990. I had just left Manushi. I was in the process of leaving actually, and there were the anti-reservation riots⁴². Reservations had already...always existed in educational employment for the so-called scheduled caste⁴³, the so-called “untouchable” people⁴⁴. Twenty-five percent existed for them. And then there was a move to extend that to other so-called other backward castes, who were not necessarily economically, but they were culturally seen as underprivileged, and to increase the amount of reservations. So then the other caste that were not backward, they..saw themselves as being really discriminated against and excluded from employment and education. And a lot of my students were very active in these movements, and a lot of young people, boys and girls, burnt themselves to death in public. And I felt that the political response was very inadequate. The left, that taught that this was a kind of pathology and was very unsympathetic to these suicides. And the right was just making use of them, and saying, “Well, see, they’re burning themselves to death, so you have to do some...But there was just absolute lack of compassion or heart about so many young people burning themselves to death. There’s something very serious about that, so it was in response to that. And it’s called **‘Mahabharata Delhi, September 1990.’**⁴⁵

Winter begins, and men in uniform
Have taken over the streets.
Somewhere, behind high walls and TV screens
Battalions in the heads of leaders form
Ready to fire; somewhere they shake hands
And smile, and mouth the words that are required.
But here the children make a date with death
And shed their flowers at obdurate feet,
Invoke a charm that makes for no exit
And find themselves besieged.
In either camp the fathers calculate
A kingdom’s price—who would not hold cheap

⁴² There were two major anti-reservation protests in 1981 and 1985.

⁴³ Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are communities that are accorded special status by the Constitution of India. These communities were considered 'outcastes' and were excluded from the Chaturvarna (four caste) system. These communities had traditionally been relegated to the most menial labour with no possibility of upward mobility. They were also historically excluded from opportunities for educational, social and economic growth. The Scheduled Caste peoples are also known as Dalits and scheduled tribe people are also referred to as Adivasis. Gandhi used the terms Harijan and Girijan respectively. For information on reservations, see footnote 23 above.

⁴⁴ In South Asia's caste system, a Dalit (also called an untouchable) is a person of the lower sections of the 'shudra' class (the lowest of the four castes). Included are leather-workers (called *chamar*), scavengers (called *bhangi* or *chura*), street handicrafters, poor farmers and laborers. Dalit is the latest and currently most politically correct of many terms used for the caste.

⁴⁵ From, Ruth Vanita. *A Play of Light: Selected Poems*. Viking, Penguin Books, India, 1994: p.22.

For such a prize honor and even blood,
Who could count the cost at Abhimanyu's feet?

That's a reference to the prince Abimanyu, the young, a very young boy, who is used by his...by the patriarchs in the Mahabharata⁴⁶ to fight a very difficult moment in the battle, and they know he's going to be killed, and they sacrifice him and he dies fighting this...

Jayati: So did you publish, say, for example, this piece in Manushi or in...at the time?

Ruth: Actually, I sent it to Manushi and they refused to publish. Because they were taking a pro-reservation stance and they...

Jayati: A pro-reservation...

Ruth:....a reservation stance, and so this...And so the suicides were sort of pathological and they thought I was kind of celebrating or glorifying them or something.

Jayati: So that this would generate too much empathy...

Ruth: Yeah.

Jayati: ...for the individuals who were doing the suicides. Interesting. So you also wrote another political poem--and since we have time, I might ask you to read that too--that I liked. And of course you could maybe talk about some other work. This is 'Fortnight after Diwali'⁴⁷ because it references the Sikh Riots⁴⁸, right?

Ruth: Um-hum. Yeah, we were very active, Manushi was very active, along with a lot of other groups and individuals. There was a huge outpouring of support for the Sikhs after the riots in Delhi, which has never been the case for Muslims, because...

Jayati: No, these riots were post Indira Gandhi, right?

⁴⁶ A celebrated sacred epic poem of the Hindus, written in Sanskrit. It is chiefly devoted to a history of a civil war between two dynasties of ancient India.

⁴⁷ Diwali Celebrations in India are similar to Christmas celebrations in the USA. The ancient story (from the Mahabharata) of how Diwali evolved into such a widely celebrated festival is different in various regions and states of India. In the north (particularly in Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana, Bihar and the surrounding areas) Diwali is the day when *King Rama's* coronation was celebrated in *Ayodhya* after his epic war with *Ravana*, the demon king of Lanka. By order of the royal families of Ayodhya and Mithila, the kingdom of which Sita was princess, the cities and far-flung boundaries of these kingdoms were lit up with rows of lamps, glittering on dark nights to *welcome home the divine king Rama and his queen Sita after 14 years of exile*, ending with an across-the-seas war in which the whole of the kingdom of Lanka was destroyed.

⁴⁸ The 1984 Anti-Sikh riots took place in India after the assassination of Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi. Mrs. Gandhi was assassinated on October 31, 1984 by two of her Sikh guards during the movement for Sikh autonomy in India. Over the next four days nearly 3,000 Sikhs were massacred in systematic programs planned and led by Congress, activists, and sympathizers. The government was widely criticized for doing very little at the time, especially since voting lists were used to identify Sikh families.

Ruth: The assassination, right. And we were in Delhi, we saw the whole thing happen, practically in front of our eyes. And one of our volunteers actually got killed in the aftermath of that. So it was written about that. It's called "**The Fortnight after Diwali, 1984.**"⁴⁹

“Never again will the arrow fly,
Flames rise, effigies crumble, crackers
Explode, never the cries of children
Rend the air, without this shadow
Leaping against the sky. How shall we
Light a candle but to illumine
Anguish and flight, these faces are stricken,
How play with fire but no awaken
Our night of shame? Where will the sun find
Tomorrow a street unwounded, place
Unmaimed? How shall we embrace, greet, smile?
How shall we look into each other's eyes?”

Manushi was actually... the office was in a neighborhood which was half Sikh-half Hindu. So we actually saw our landlords were Sikhs and we were very close to them. We saw the local group that are being burnt and...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Ruth: ...we tried to, Madhu tried to actually go...she was always the one to put herself in the real physical danger and she tried to stop those rioters from burning the [inaudible?]. But of course there was no way to stop them. So we actually saw all this happening.

Jayati: This was in Lajpat Nagar? When you were in Lajpat Nagar?⁵⁰

Ruth: Um-hum. It's a lower middle to middle class neighborhood.

Jayati: And I think I interrupted you earlier. You were saying that, that the response to the Sikh Riots was very different than the response to the Muslim riots [inaudible].

Ruth: Yes. Because the Muslim sects hadn't had any history of being...they'd had a history of being allies and not of inter-marrying, inter [inaudible] everything. Whereas Hindus and Muslims have had centuries of very fraught conflicted history. So there have been so many...and Muslim-Hindu riots, where there is no great outpouring of public support. But for the Sikh Riots and unprecedented outpouring of support from very nonpolitical people who came to help at the refugee camps.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Ruth: Huge range of people who had never before done any such thing.

⁴⁹ From, Ruth Vanita. *A Play of Light: Selected Poems*. Viking, Penguin Books, India, 1994: p.23.

⁵⁰ Manushi's offices were in Lajpat Nagar, which is a residential and commercial community in South Delhi.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Ruth: And when we went to Meerut to be...women's group went...from Manushi we went to Meerut after the riots then, in '87, and did a very detailed house-to-house report. We could see the sort of absolute walls of hatred between Hindus and Muslims. There's very little empathy or willingness to help each other. Whereas with the Sikhs, there wasn't that...it got mended sooner. I think between the Muslim, Sikhs now the relationship is much better than between Hindus and...

Jayati: But of course it was a different historical time, because the Muslim riots happened after Babri Masjid,⁵¹ most of them, so that there's that...

Ruth: Not really. I think we forget that there's a whole history of...

Jayati: Right.

Ruth: ...it before. '87 was before. And there's a history dating back. I've looked at medieval sources even...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Ruth: ...where there were riots or where a Hindu processing a mosque and playing music or over a cow slaughter and all this. This goes back really long.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Ruth: And of course it's convenient to say that it's postcolonial and it's post-[inaudible], but certainly not, it has a really long...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Ruth: ...unfortunately long...But with Sikhs it didn't, and that's why it was so shocking to people that this could happen.

Jayati: Particularly in Delhi, which is so dominated by sort of Punjabis⁵² ...

Ruth: Um-hum.

Jayati: ...culture. So this is interesting, because you wrote, you said you wrote these between '90 and '93, so this was a retrospective poem about 1984?

Ruth: No, no, no, no.

Jayati: Or this one was different?

⁵¹ A mosque in Delhi that was demolished by right-wing Hindu militants on December 6, 1992. Violence between Hindus and Muslims followed all over the country.

⁵² Punjabi is the language of the Punjabi people and the Punjab regions of India and Pakistan.

Ruth: This particular one...

Jayati: Because one was written then.

Ruth: ...was written at that time. No, I was writing throughout, but there was a sudden burst at that time. Yeah.

Jayati: Um, there was another poem, which I wonder if you could tell us about, before we go to some of your more, the shorter, love poems. That deals with...it's quite long, but maybe you could read an excerpt that deals with Siddharta, who he was and what the poem is trying to do and...

Ruth: Yeah. Siddharta was a young activist who was gay. He was a lawyer and he died at the age of 27 of Hodgkin's disease. He was very active in ABVA, which brought out that little pamphlet, "Less than Gay."⁵³

Jayati: Do you know what ABVA stands for?

Ruth: Yeah. 'AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan' Anti-AIDS Discrimination Movement...

Jayati: Uh-huh.

Ruth: ...is how they translate it. And after his death, every year, these are some of the earliest gay events in there. We organized film festivals and I was marginally active in those. We organized gay film festivals...

Jayati: This was when?

Ruth: In Delhi. He died in '92. So '93, '94, '95. Every year there was one. They weren't called gay film festivals. They were called Siddharta film festivals, but all the...almost all the films were about LGBT issues in some way. So it was a poem written when he...in memory of him when he died. And they used it in some of the publicity for one of the film festivals. Some of my poems also appear in Manushi, even some...even one poem about love between women did appear in an early issue of Manushi. So Manushi did publish some stuff on love between women intermittently.

Jayati: And this was because you submitted them, or they got picked up [inaudible]?

Ruth: Well, I was working on it.

Jayati: Right.

Ruth: I put it in.

⁵³ Siddhartha Gautam was a lawyer and human rights activist in India. He was one of the first people in India to talk about HIV/AIDS as a human rights issue and started AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan (ABVA) in 1989-90, the first AIDS activist group in the country.

Jayati: Uh-huh. So could you maybe read a portion of this poem?

Ruth: Okay.

Jayati: And it's intertwined with another story, isn't it?

Ruth: Yeah, the other story was of a young woman who was working as a domestic servant in the Miranda House teachers' apartments, where I lived for some time. And she was a colleague's maid. And she was about 22. She was also around his age, and she was illiterate, a very different context, but also a different kind of victim. So it was about that. But it has a little bit about him.

"Doctors found names, found ways to give him a few more years. But he threw up wealth, career and went in search of the right. The rights of women picked up without love of men police pick up for roaming the hopeless streets, furtively groping for each other's hands, for the touch that may turn tender. He burnt himself out like a candle at both ends."

Jayati: And there you were trying to make an explicit link between...

Ruth: Prostitution and gay men cruising, because these are the groups that anti-AIDS groups work with.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Ruth: They always work with both groups of people. Because of transmission.

Jayati: Um, you have some other poems that I'd...like to hear you read. Maybe you can talk about them. Has that been sort of a...that you can write those concurrently on political issues and more personal relationships and [inaudible]?

Ruth: Well, at that time when I was writing, yeah, I did. And even my academic work is very personal in the sense...and now I'm writing about same-sex marriage and I married in 2000 and then went to India and held a reception at the International Center in Delhi.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Ruth: Invited all my colleagues and my family. And there was a lot of tension and lot of trouble about that, within the family. My colleagues were wonderful about it.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Ruth: Um...

Jayati: Your colleagues here, or the...

Ruth: In Delhi.

Jayati: Uh-huh.

Ruth: We married in New York, but we had a reception in Delhi, the same year. So it is a personal issue in that sense, and then I've attended a wedding of Indian women in the U.S., and I'm writing about marriages there, so...you know, it's personal and political.

Jayati: Um-hum. So while we're on this topic then, so you...the slogan "The personal is political"⁵⁴ has been so central to American Feminism.

Ruth: Um-hum.

Jayati: Do you feel it has valence in other contexts as well? Such as when you were living in India and when you were coming out?

Ruth: Yeah, I think it's very true, because if politics is about power, then it's about the power or the powerlessness that you experience. And certainly in the women's movement I experienced certain kinds of empowerment as a woman. I did things that I wouldn't have done otherwise. I stayed out late at night on the streets, getting work done and things like that. I traveled a lot. But there was other kind of disempowerment, because I wasn't empowered to speak about sexuality in the women's movement. I had to find another forum to do that, which I did, but...So they were tied up very intimately.

Jayati: Could you read to us from...a selection?

Ruth: Okay. This one is called "**Breakdown.**"⁵⁵

"Suddenly, without explanation,
You withdraw, like a power failure,
Neat, complete, irresistible.
In a flash I am blinded and grope
For a candle to restore some shape.
What comes to light lacks color, though,
And, utterly without delight, just is.
Heat and stillness. Nothing moves but my
Shadow and the flame. Minutes burn away."

Jayati: And this was...?

⁵⁴ The phrase "the personal is political" first took hold via the United States women's movement of the 1960s. The slogan became popular in the 1970s as a way to convey to women who were suffering in silence that their individual experiences were, in fact, instances of widespread sexism. The spirit of the sentiment was perfectly captured by consciousness-raising groups, which promoted solidarity by providing a forum for individual women to see how much they had in common with others. In the effort to promote gender-consciousness, the privacy ethic understandably appeared to be an impediment, encouraging silence about just the kinds of experiences feminists wanted to bring to the political fore.

⁵⁵ From, Ruth Vanita. *A Play of Light: Selected Poems*. Viking, Penguin Books, India, 1994, p.69.

Ruth: These love poems were mostly about three rela—very different relationships with three women in those years. Actually one was before, but the others were '90 to '94. And it was just my way of coping with the difficulties of those relationships and almost all these poems I didn't gender the...I kept the genders very uncertain, which a lot of homosexual poets have done...

Jayati: Uh-huh.

Ruth: ...through time. And it's intere—it's ironic that one women reviewer in India just assumed it was a woman writing to a man and thought it was a very male-dominated relationship, and just like...[laughter]

Jayati: So did you have to set her straight in public or...no or...?

Ruth: I do not [laughing].

Jayati: No?

Ruth: Just amazing.

Jayati: Uh-huh. Could you read to us from "Rain"⁵⁶ too as well?

Ruth: Okay.

“Too much of a good thing, rain drips slowly on,
Day after day, comes through the roof, spreads
Damply over walls, grows fur on books, hangs
Fetid in air, creeps achingly moistly
Into back and limbs. No sun in the sky;
Voltage dips; and matches, one by one,
Refuse to light, drop dead. Fed up, I fall
On the bed, hoping for sleep. But oh too soon
Ignited, memory strikes your eyes, your hands,
Your lips ablaze against my dreams, set skin alight:
Words blaze, air crackles, flames flicker and spit,
Hiss, then softly roar. Too hot to breathe.
Come my sun, my rain, my arbiter,
Steady this fire no weather can deter..”

Jayati: So you have reference there that occur as the weather, the monsoon, the heat...

Ruth: Yeah. I was living at the in a room...

Jayati: ...yeah.

Ruth: ...that was very damp and...

⁵⁶ From, Ruth Vanita. *A Play of Light: Selected Poems*. Viking, Penguin Books, India, 1994, p.70.

Jayati: Uh-huh.

Ruth: ...the water was destroying the books and coming through the walls and matches really don't light there.

Jayati: In the monsoon, nothing dries either. Right. If we could just, while we're on this, you mentioned, you know, your marriage and the book that you're working on, in terms of marriage in the U.S. and India, gay...same-sex marriage. You know, in the U.S., it's such a contemporary hotspot right now politically. And some of the critique that's been coming up is from within the gay movement, saying that, you know, this isn't what, say, feminism fought for. This isn't what, this sort of conservative move to want to use marriage or claim the legality of marriage for same-sex partners. Do you think that that sort of critique has the same meaning in India? Or how do you...maybe I'm asking you to give you...a preview of your book, or an analysis in that won't be...

Ruth: Well, I think that critique only makes sense if you think of marriage as only an oppressive, as only and always and everywhere an oppressive institution, structured for the domination of women and children. And I think it has been that as well, and still is that in many places, in many marriages. But I don't think it's only that. I think marriage is also a way...has always been, even in Indian literature you can see it in the earliest Indian texts, a way of declaring and publicly stating your commitment and your love. You can see it in Shakuntala⁵⁷ love, for example...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Ruth: ...where this woman just decides to marry this man without her father's permission. So it's a way of doing what you want to do, which is stating your love. And it has that power and that dimension, as is clear from these Indian women who marry each other in India, and from the women, the people who married each other in San Francisco. So it's also about that. And that...and that, of course, has nothing to do with the state. But where the state comes in, is that in India, the state doesn't give as many privileges to married couples as they do here.

Jayati: Right, right.

Ruth: Here they give a huge number of privileges. So if they want to give those privileges to married couples, then I think they should give them to married same-sex couples as well. Otherwise they should stop giving them to everyone.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Ruth: Which they're not going to do. In India, though, the state is less involved, and that's one of the things I'm writing about, that in...under Hindu marriage law, any two people who get married by religious ceremony, that is, in one of their communities, they are considered legally married. They don't have to get a marriage license, they don't have to register it, and most people don't.

⁵⁷ In Hindu mythology Shakuntala was considered to be the mother of Emperor Bharata and the wife of Dushyanta who was the founder of the Paurav vansha (Paurav Dynasty). For more detail, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shakuntala>

Jayati: And that is, they state the sex of...I think you've said this, that it's ambiguous.

Ruth: Well, the Hindu Marriage Act⁵⁸ states...doesn't say 'man' and 'woman' anywhere.

Jayati: Yeah.

Ruth: It says, "marriage of two Hindus."

Jayati: Um-hum.

Ruth: But then it goes on to use the terms "bride" and "groom" throughout.

Jayati: Um-hum. Um-hum.

Ruth: And in almost all of these cases, these women presented one as the bride and one as the groom. They actually use those terms.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Ruth: It's interesting, was in the California case⁵⁹, the application form was changed to say "Applicant 1" and "Applicant 2" instead of bride and groom, and on that ground it's now being challenged to say it wasn't a marriage, because you changed the form and it doesn't say "bride" and "groom."

Jayati: Hm. Um-hum.

Ruth: So it's interesting. I'm looking at the Hindu marriage law as distinct from the U.S. marriage law and how that plays out in terms of what the state's role is. And I think in India the state's role is much less.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Ruth: The state doesn't even know how many people are married in India, because most people...

Jayati: Don't have to do...register.

Ruth: ...never registered their marriage, right? So you don't know when they're married, they're divorced, they're remarried, whatever.

Jayati: But if they choose to by civil law, what would their restrictions be?

⁵⁸ Hindus are governed by Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 which provides for the conditions of a Hindu Marriage where under the bridegroom should be of 21 years and bride of 18 years. It states conditions for marriage under this act.

⁵⁹ In 2004, more than 2,600 homosexual couples who were "married" with the help of San Francisco city and county officials. Couples crossed out "groom" and "bride" as printed on the standard application and wrote in phrases such as "Applicant #1" and "Applicant #2" or "spouses for life." The California state agency that records marriages stated that forms that have been altered (which San Francisco had done on its homosexual "marriage" licenses) would not be registered. The California state courts ultimately ruled that these marriages were illegal and had violated California state law by altering the marriage application forms.

Ruth: Then some of those women have tried to...they've gone to the marriage registrar and tried to register them. They have been refused, in two or three cases. And that's very interesting. But I think if they file a legal case and you had a really good lawyer, you could make a really good argument that one is the bride, one is the groom, the law doesn't say it has to be man and a woman. The law says they have to marry according to the custom prevalent in one of their communities, which they did. They married in temples with priests, with families, and the community, thinks that's according to the custom. The community has an important role in Indian marriage law, which it doesn't here.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Ruth: And so how can the state tell you it's not? So it could be fought. And I'm sure it will be, it just hasn't been fought yet.

Jayati: And also if this sort of inheritance laws gets...get changed to be more progressive, to give partners rights upon the death of one partner, then that might become...make gay marriage even more important in India, right?

Ruth: Um-hum.

Jayati: That is to say that the avenue of marriage and civil unions, and so if we were to get into...

Ruth: Of course I know many couples living in India who are virtually married. They've never had a ceremony, at least a public one, but they've lived together for over two decades, they've raised children together, and they are treated everywhere as a couple so...there's that.

Jayati: Um-hum. Well, I wonder if you could sort of reflect a little bit on your life, you know, statement, you know, what's to come obviously. But in terms of where you are now: what honor, award or achievement that you've received in the various awards and honors that you've received are you more sort of proud of and feel good about, or...?

Ruth: I think it's my work on *Same-Sex Love in India*, the first book, *Same-Sex Love in India*...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Ruth: ...and the current book comes out of that really. I think that's it. Because I don't think at that moment, the way Saleem and I did it, we focused on the primary sources. I think most other gay academics are focusing on the present, which a very useful thing to do, but I think this wouldn't have been done for some time, in exactly this way.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Ruth: And so I'm really glad we did that and I'm happy with what the...

Jayati: Um-hum. And what kind of personal impact has the work that you've been doing over the last couple of decades that we've been talking about, what sort of impact has it had

on you? Obviously, you know, who you are and what you thought influenced what you did. But I'm sort of now asking the reverse. What did...if you think of it now...

Ruth: Uh-huh.

Jayati: ...how has the work that you've been doing influenced you? Where do you see yourself perhaps going in the future?

Ruth: Um-hum. Well, it's...it's enabled me to do many things, but I've...and make many moves and be mobile and live through many sort of very different circumstances -- from being very Christian, to being Marxist, to being involved in the women's movement, to working on lesbianism and gay issues, that...so it's taken me on this very interesting trajectory. And I've also lived through great historical moments. Like who would have thought that the whole gay marriage issue would come up at this time?

Jayati: Uh-hum. Um-hum.

Ruth: Or the fall of the Soviet Union? So just some very interesting historical moments. So, yeah, that's...that's what I see.

Jayati: And is there anything else that you'd like to add to the interview that we haven't talked about?

Ruth: Hm, no.

Jayati: Any issues that you want to bring up or...?

Ruth: No, I think we talked about...

Jayati: Yeah? We talked about...I really want to thank you so much for sharing...

Ruth: Thank you.

Jayati: ...your work and giving us this time.

Ruth: Thanks.

Jayati: And, um, thank you very much, Ruth...

Ruth: Sure. Thank you.

Jayati: ...for coming today.