

**SANDHYA GOKHALE (born 1956)**

**Electrical engineer by profession, member of Forum Against Oppression of Women, (FAOW) Bombay since 1980.**

**Interviewed by Laxmi Murthy**

Laxmi Murthy: So Sandhya, what I wanted to ask you was your first impressions of the women's movement? When would you say you joined the women's movement?

Sandhya Gokhale: I say around 1980 when Forum got formed. Before that I was part of general student movement, left movement, Trade union movement, not women's movement

LM Where was it? when was that -can you describe it? how old you were? What you were doing?

SG I was almost in my ...just finished IIT education. So I was very ...when we were in the student's movement it was the students group in IIT.

L What was it called?

S It wasn't ...like called anything. We were a group of about 30 students and we started questioning what kind of elite students come to IIT... and we started with the Mood Indigo, the cultural festival - again what sort of student come there and we felt the need to understand whatever is happening in society. We started studying industrial revolution to start with and some of the students were exposed to Marxism through whatever links. So then we started Das Kapital, Communist Manifesto and like that we had student group we also started working with workers in IIT . The watchmen, the mess workers - we formed their union and then we worked at all IIT federation level.. so we got involved in the union...then outside IIT also some garment workers through mess workers contact they came to us we started working with them in the union. So during the student phase we also organized something called the alternate school where besides what is taught to us like say Samuelson economics which is taught in IIT or the understanding of history we also wanted to hear different views and actually surprising it is the first time - Chaya Datar we had called ok (laughs) -that's the first feminist understanding that I remember hearing.

L When was this?

S That was I think ...umm '77 - so where Chaya spoke about you know the double burden on women and how a woman actually buffers the capitalist attack and how they reproduce the labour. So that was I mean since it was not that one did not face discrimination as a woman right from home -not my parents but by grandmother and even in IIT all of us had terrible time because we are very few women - we had really bad time but ... we just sort of took it in our stride

and...whatever even in our student group there were mostly boys –hardly any maybe five

L By bad time what do you mean?

S Bad time means immense amount of sexual harassment from the boys on the campus, quite bad...and for a long time all of us ...we used to think it is only happening to me –in the sense because the IIT atmosphere is such an intellectual atmosphere -somebody looking at you as a sexual object means you are not intellectually right - that kind of a message is given so you don't even want to talk about how you are treated by boys to another girl. But slowly we started talking and we realized and that was simultaneous with the kind of restrictions put on the girls hostel –like our hostel was called Ladies Hostel – we started agitation around that – we don't want to call it Ladies Hostel – we want to call it Hostel 10. That was our first thing. We didn't think in terms of feminism but it was just being treated equally and then we had like rules like that after ten o'clock you can't get out of the hostel or you can't come in also. We held our own meeting and we decided we don't agree with this rule and we brought in another set of rules by which we can do whatever we want. And then we had rules like you can't allow people entering the hostel – men cannot enter our hostels – so that also we voted and we decided that men can accompanied by the student – the girl student can enter the hostel. So these kind of things we were doing but not so much as a feminist understanding but just a simple notion of equality.

L You joined IIT when?

S Umm '74

L And there were how many girls in your class?

S We were...in my class I was the only girl.

L Out of?

S Out of – see we had two classes. So out of 160. I was the only girl so . .

L This was which stream?

S Engineering. Electrical Engineering. So ..in our hostel there were only 35 students – out of which majority were PhD students. So for graduate courses or engineering I think there were very few girls. So there some other girls in pure science but not in engineering. So basically we got used to – atleast I got used to being alone in the guys and it didn't feel and these kind of ...I mean guys really used to trouble in terms of making phone calls. Or even even stealing your books in order to and demanding meet me at this place in order to return. But we dealt it more or less on an individual level. Slowly we started talking about it but actually giving it some kind of understanding that how patriarchy works or what feminism is about came much later – started with Chaya (small laugh) actually introducing I am particularly on the issue of labour, social productive,

reproductive - reproduction of labour forces things like that- more at intellectual level.

L Is that when you heard the work patriarchy for the first time? you remember any of it?

S Ya sort of. But before that because we literally – Das Capital you know Volume one and all we all read –I remember we all read – 30 of us discussing in one room whole lot of students – continuously 30 of us would discuss. But we never discussed uh the fair cure feminism.

L So between 77 when you said Chaya came and started getting conscious of it to 1980 when you say Forum started emerging – what happened during then in terms of your activism?

S Uh see for example we started working more closely because we were already working with the unions right –more to do with women workers – so like when we were involved in garment struggle – almost you can say 60% of the workforce was women. So it was interacting with them and lot of trade union other activists used to come and talk to us that how come in your union women are participating in such huge numbers. And how come in our Union women do not participate. Actually the reasons are very different – it is not because of some of us had feminist understanding - because by that time you know we got people like Gayatri Singh working with us and even Indira Jaisingh - so it was a mixture of political plus feminist thought . But I would say my actual feminist understanding developing happened through participating in the process of Forum.

L Was it called Forum then?

S It was called Forum Against Oppression of Rape. Forum Against Rape, ya.

L When was the first meeting?

S It was in early eighties. I don't remember the month or date whatever it is. It was post – Upendra Baxi wrote an open letter about Mathura Case , then a group of us came together .

L Where did you meet?

S We first met in ISRE where actually this whole thing started with Mira Savara and Manju Upadhaya – they wrote – those days there were no e-mails and things like that – so they wrote a letter and circulated it amongst known progressive circles that we as women need to do something about this particular case. This was in response to the Open Letter which Upendra Baxi had written. And so whole lot of people came – actually all the women who came initially – they were all from you can say leftist background. I mean they were active in different left groups – far left groups. And uh they were already dissatisfied with the way their left groups were functioning in terms of the gender bias which they must have experienced. All - most of the women who initially came they were all from left background.

- L Who was there – do you remember in these first meetings?
- S Ya there was like Nandita Gandhi was there, Gayatri was there, Indira Jaising was there, Mira Savara as I said, Manju Upadhyaya, then ...whole lot of people including uhh people like Ritu Dewan – quite a few people .
- L Do you remember that first Conference which is in a way scene as the precursor to the autonomous women’s movement – the 1980 Conference against rape
- S Ya
- L Do you remember –
- S Ya ya Very vividly
- L you were part of organizing it?
- S yes
- L So where was the conference?
- S That conference was in Bombay. It was in a sort of dharamshala near Khar and I think around 200 women had come for that conference.
- L How did you mobilize for that conference in the pre – I mean how did you contact the other groups?
- S Letters. Basically lot of groups started - small groups were formed but all of them were known to each other either because of their linkage with different left groups or left movement. So mostly the groups who came were autonomous in nature – autonomous in the sense that they were a small group formation and not part of any established left party. So these are – most of the women who came I would say were us – with left background but not with any left party. That also happened in Forum - initially in Forum people would come from Sarvodaya background to CPM uh Gandhian – all sorts of people – Samajwadi people like Mrinal Gore and all also started participating. Slowly people left because the politics which started evolving –they probably found it difficult to accept.
- L In what sense?
- S Say for example there is one particular case where a woman was sexually harassed and then – she was a worker in an industrial estate – she was also killed by the employer. Now when the agitation started –uh we figured out that CPM – CITU union took advantage of it to increase whatever their presence in the industrial estate. So in that process what happened to the woman worker became a sort of a subsidiary issue. It wasn’t taken up as this happened to her because ..it was taken up more as a labour issue and they almost overtook the campaign, so we had lot of debate and we said that when we are taking up the campaign no outside group can decide what should happen to it but basically

women should decide and through that whatever criticism came I think CPM uh uh people withdrew. They also told us that we are splitting the working class – you know those kind of accusations. And then usual accusation came you know foreign funded, CIA agent – whatever – so CPM got out. But also the kind of radical critique which was made in terms of –uh which is there even today in that slut walk uh what it is talking about – what basically is the power structure in society which is perpetuating sexual assault. And nothing to do with what women wear or what women say – you know I have a right to go anywhere in – so lot of people – lot of women themselves were not sure about that kind of thinking also. On one hand if it happens say – many of the assaults also happened within the bastis so the organizations who had a kind of mass following – they would find it very hard to take a stand against men. So that was also one reason unh people left. Quite . there are some groups who decided to form –particularly the far left group uh –they decided – they also didn't like the critique put forth of left parties – right. So Stri Kruti was started by more ML inclined people – so like that slowly people started moving away.

- L This sort of accusation of uh foreign funded CIA and all where did that come from because in the early eighties there wasn't that kind of funding coming?
- S No funding, but our meetings used to happen in ISRE – see we did not have a place – we did not have money –nothing but our meetings – Mira Savara was working in ISRE and uh it was a library ISRE was a library
- L This was what BUILD, BUILD
- S ISRE was the name of the place. I do not even remember the full form.
- L Umh Umh
- S It was basically a library of whole lot of books and uh Mira was working there and they provided us with a space to meet – so there was no other linkage except the fact that we used to meet in that place. And because we started objecting to CITU or CPM taking over things – that is when they started all this rumours you know that we are foreign funded. Actually we had no funds at all.
- L Was there any consciousness, like we say autonomous women's groups - was autonomous from government, funding and so on – do you remember at that time, looking back whether you articulated it as we are part of the autonomous movement as a conscious delineation?
- S I think there was, because I remember we had number of meetings to discuss what kind of structure we want and after many discussions we figured out we do not want a structure as such. The reasons were many. Because people had observed in their own party –bureaucracy and authority gets established uh how money can become an important issues – see those days there were no NGOs as such but the power of money within political parties was seen and acknowledged. Uh the hierarchy that gets established that was also seen and acknowledged. I remember we had a number of meetings to discuss whether we should register, whether we want a kind of a structure, whether we want designations and all of us very consciously decided neither we want funds nor

we want to register nor we want a structure. See what used to happen whenever we used to take up any issue – we used to form committees –like we used to have a committee for mobilization, committee to handle press, one committee to handle legal side, one committee to go and investigate. And people would decide which Committee they would want to be. We realized that whoever works maximum in those committees – normally they automatically have the decision making role because they know the best since they have worked on it. So we didn't require uh any particular authority or designation to decide and come to a decision. Uh the decision used to be unanimous and based on what effort had put in people used to opine and it would be accepted. So we did not even feel the need for structure. And infact we felt if we bring in structure the whole voluntariness of this movement and the fact that if you put in effort then your voice will be heard – that itself will get overshadowed.

L And everyone was doing a full time – most of them?

S Ya, most of them. But I guess today what the kind of resources which are required for survival it was not so bad so people could manage. Like say for example my first job – I was getting paid 800 rupees per month and I could very well survive and was

L When was this?

S This was in '81. So I could – it is not that I had any money left at the end of the month – I used to even sell the newspaper –the remaining newspaper at the end of the month. We were you see there was no notion that you had to you need to save –you need to – because I think those were magic days. You had lots of aspirations and hopes that you were going to bring change in the world. No one bothered about savings. As long as you could manage to survive it was okay.

L What were your working hours like? As in office work.

S Office work. Actually initial few years I worked with the trade union un so that was you could manage Forum activism and trade unionism. Because even when I was working with the trade union as such – I was the trade union used to never pay anything. I used to stay with my parents or I used to stay in my hostel where through friends food used to get subsidized and whatever travel expenses one could always take from – but when – you can't carry on like that for ever, then I took up a job. Also the experiments we did at the trade union level – that was organizing small scale workers and women workers did not actually succeed like I said initially we were organising women workers in various areas -uh we could not cope with the trade unionism which existed then – again as we were participating in Forum at the same time – the notion of democracy and having collective decision making process we tried to bring that in the Union also and it did not succeed. And I remember one particular huge union and there was a lockout. The management was ready to take back the workers – open the lockout if they keep 13-14 workers out and the decision has to be taken. And since we wanted a collective decision we had a big Committee and we told the Committee. We can tell you the positive and negative aspects of both – thirteen workers in or out. But you have to take a decision. And the Committee did not want to do that. They wanted us to take the decision. And we said no.

This is a collective functioning and you have to take the decision. Like that it went on for few days and then suddenly –uh one day we realized –in the morning we reached the factory gate and there was Datta Samant's flag (laughs) and they had all en masse gone and joined Datta Samant without even telling us. And that was absolutely heart-rendering. I cried and cried that day. And Datta Samant told them – everybody goes back or nobody goes in. And you know that factory never opened after that. Today that Leela K .....international hotel which exists today – that was Leela Garment factory. And the workers wanted something like that, but uh I am not blaming Datta Samant or anything for giving that decision. Maybe the factory could have reopened if they had gone back, but one doesn't know. I mean if you look at today most of the factories in Bombay are closed anyway. But you know what I mean is – that kind of collective functioning notion which we wanted –we had in Forum or feminist groups – we wanted to take that to trade union also and it didn't work in the trade union movement, though it worked in the feminist movement. So how ...I guess in that group we more or less came from similar background, either you can say caste, class, education – the kind of privileges – so in a way we were on equal footing. That does not happen when you are working as trade union activist and there are workers.

- L You don't think it was due to gender? That all of you were women in Forum
- S There were women no! I said 60% workforce was women.
- L None in the leadership?
- S None even in the leadership we had a mixed group. We had Colin Gonsalves. We had Sagar Dhara. Indira Jaisingh was there. Gayatri was there. I can almost say we were 50–50 men and women active. So-it wasn't gender. No definitely not. I would say in those days –today might be a little different –but in those days because of our class privilege and because of the fact that we were coming from IITs students – I don't think men –male workers –they did not look down. They didn't look at us differently. At least that is what I can recollect. It wasn't the fact that we were women and as I said we were both –men-women -it was a different group but I think it was the notion of what is democracy in different set-up?
- L Speaking about taking the concepts of collective functioning to the union and all– similar thing of taking ideas of like the critiques of the family or marriage and so on – was there a conscious attempt at that time so say having different living arrangements or communes and so on or was that more of part of the left tradition – you know CPI kind of communes that they have. Was there any kind of discussion in those days?
- S I don't think so. Not in terms of actual practice because I guess we were too busy agitating on the streets and .. there were communes even in Bombay but more from the left tradition– far left tradition. Not from the feminist as such.
- L Why do you think it was so? Why didn't it translate into trying to live differently?

- S Trying to ...At one level the movement was very heterosexual in nature. Heteronormativity was not questioned at all. So uh most of the women – even if they were either rejecting the typical notion of family – they were not critical of heteronormativity. So it did not lead to women living together.
- L No even in terms of several men and several women – you know this whole nuclear family – the division of labour within the family –cooking and eating whatever – the way the left did that you pool in resources and even when everybody is working together – it seems to make more sense – you know there is a common kitchen – you rotate tasks.
- S Uh I guess even in those days whatever communes I saw – I did not find that they were gender-sensitive. So even in the communes – for example in one place we used to go – that was a commune of far left group. There in one room all of us used to sit and have political debates. So that time the role of the women in the commune was not something which even in those days I appreciated. Ok you could see the gender bias even within the commune. So you were critical of the commune and did not want those kind of communes where – see all the women who came to women’s movement were very upset with the gender bias which existed in the left groups and the communes at that time. So I don’t think we were in a position to look at – you know form another commune where we would be struggling daily with the men in the commune to talk about gender equality. So rather we wanted to keep that out and have a women only collective and as I said all said and done it was very heteronormative – so there was no question of having communes where only women could stay together. I don’t think that thought even occurred.
- L What about motherhood and child birth – was there a conscious decision on the part of many women not to have children or spend time on individual child care?
- S I think so. In fact I remember some very bitter moments when there some women who had children and who had what one calls ‘normal’ household – they really felt badgered from both sides – feminists as well as household because the feminist group expected too much in terms of activism or input required and it was very difficult for them to cope on both level and they were pretty bitter about it. So most of us ... we didn’t want. See with the Marxist understanding there was a critique of family –ok, not necessarily from the gender point of view but the private property blablabla – so many of us didn’t want to get married and those who were married also looked at it differently. Not necessarily from a gender perspective. I think it evolved over a period in Forum, as part of Forum one evolved a gender perspective over time. There was a Marxist critique of family no doubt and see all of us were revolting against what we saw injustice even at the personal level, right. Maybe the understanding evolved uh this thing but it wasn’t – it wasn’t in order to find alternative, it was just a protest. So I don’t think the understanding of commune or anything came up that time.
- L Ok, now on a different track – do you remember the first street protest – the feminist street protest by Forum – where was it – what was the main issue? Was it a rape?



S Ya

L So where was it?

S I don't remember the very first one because there were many and you know interestingly in the initial phase our male sympathizers also used to come but only in the initial phase later on they felt they were not required and we also felt we did not require so they didn't come. Initially they used to come. I don't remember the very first but there are some very memorable such protests – there are some one remembers where people thought they could use us like you know goondas (laughs) let loose. There was lot of thinking. No I don't remember the very first one –no.

L Which one do you remember – a memorable one

S I remember one where one – the one I spoke about where the woman worker in the industrial estate had got killed – that was one huge public protest. Then there was one contract construction worker a girl – she was sexually assaulted – so there also with the police and all we had a massive rally and I think that was the first time Flavia gave a speech (laughs). It was somewhere Durbhe police station. Then there was one – it was in some – basically most of them were I would say anything to do with sort of upper class or upper caste but they were from the bastis and communities. I guess in those days women from well to do classes or castes did not report sexual assault. So most of our agitations would be around the bastis, and things like that.

L What do you remember about the moods of the onlookers? The mood of the rally?

S I think the onlookers – the onlookers I think a lot of them would be taken aback because things like this the first time we had spoken out on road – and the mood was like most of the women were so – it was as if it was touching each one's person. It was very emotional. No one was bothered whether you get arrested by police, you were put in prison in those days. Both were absolutely non-issues. And truly I don't think the kind of police action which one sees today and the repression – it wasn't that bad. I mean I remember going inside the prison on trade union issues but because we held demonstrations, morchas, stopped traffic we were never taken in, which is most surprising. At the same time for trade union activities we were taken in.

L Was it – did you at that time also Fountain and that area where there would regularly be rallies and?

S No no – it was all over. In fact townside was not the favourite most ...Bastis, police stations wherever it happened – societies where it happened those were the places where the protest would – where actually the incident would take place.

L And when did Forum Against Rape become FAOW?

S Within a year.

L So, right in by 1981

S Ya

L ok. And what was the thinking behind it?

S Uh because actually when wherever we went – either to protest or investigate women started approaching with issues which were other than sexual assault – basically issues of domestic issues and personal level issues. So we didn't know how -we cannot say we won't take it up, so we have to take it up. At the same time from within the Forum after some four months Flavia started talking about the domestic violence she experienced so we took that up also. So because of the sheer function we were involved in we changed it into Forum Against Oppression of Women. It was no longer just sexual assault, I mean at that time we would call rape, today we also call it sexual assault.

L At that time was it called domestic violence at that time or wife beating or some other family violence or something?

S No I think from those days only we used to call domestic violence. Though common words used would have been wife beating, but I don't remember a transition from family or wife beating to domestic violence. That was the normal term used domestic violence.

L When do you remember – was there a shift between you know doing public street protest and rallies to taking up individual women's issues and trying to seeing them through to what would have been called 'case work' – quote-unquote. Uh when did you see that happening?

S I think within two years. 1982 it started happening. Early 82 –late 81. Because actually as women started approaching with their issues – it was impossible to function as a campaign group because uh we used to meet once twice in the week in the evening –after whatever your job is over, but with women who have problems – they can't wait for you to become free and then talk about it – right. So the necessity was felt and the actually the initiative was taken by Flavia. She – it started actually in Sonal's house – Sonal Shukla who was also part of Forum. So uh she gave one room so first initially it started twice in a week – whole day it would be open and Flavia would be there and uh where it was open for women to come with their issues.

L What was the name of that? It was not called Women's Center at that time?

S No. Initial period – I don't remember when the name Women's Center came, but actually around that time some of us started working more around trade union issues. So while working with Forum we also tried to form something like Nari Sanghush Samiti – okay, where we wanted to intervene at trade union level and take up womens workers issues so while domestic violence where Flavia was involved was going on, some of us were also becoming active on the trade union front like Nurses Union wherever women were more in number –

so we started going in that areas. But there also we realized that the unions were far less effective while talking to the women workers because if we went there and wanted to talk about issues of women like sexual violence or what happens in terms of discrimination –uh nurses all of them would come but if the Union wanted to call a meeting – hardly any nurses would turn up (laughs). So the unions were also interested in us coming there but some of us because we got involved in that – I don't recollect when we started calling it Women's Center. I was involved but not so active

L But how why do you say – I am trying to understand that you started getting involved in trade union issues at this time since you were already involved –you personally were involved since your student days?

S But that was a mixed group, right?

L Ok.

S It was a mixed group. We had also formed a group called Bolshevik Lenin's Group – which was debating left thinking – it was a mixed group. Now we started to work specifically on womens issues. So group from Forum – only women.

L Was that the Union Research Group? URG?

S No no Union Research Group is again a mixed group

L Ok. So what this called?

S This was called Nari Sanghursh Samiti.

L Okay

S And it was only by women and working around issues of class and women. So from Forum we had this group which was working on domestic violence, we had a group which was working on class and we also had the Forum existing. So then after – that was the time we started working on the domestic violence. We all used to participate, you know like if you want to respond to a woman's need like she wants to leave her house and she wants to take out her things -then all of us used to go to help take the things out but in terms of counseling done etc – that was mainly done by Flavia because she was present throughout the day. Evening whatever help was required some of us would pitch in.

L How did you respond I mean you personally respond to this whole thing of dowry – you know a lot of women whose parents would give them dowry and then when there is a problem then they want the dowry back but was that family actually questioning dowry itself? Like they would not give dowry for another daughter. How did you see people looking at the dowry issue. How big was an issue was it in Bombay as compared to say Delhi?

S Uh I think domestic issue was major issue rather than just dowry. Even today, there were a lot of people who argued dowry as consumerism. We saw dowry as

denial of inheritance for women and most of the time –I would say most of the cases to Forum that would come were not from upper class. Even those days. They were again from not so well to do class so that the dowry was more in terms of what was given to women you know things or jewellery and we used to just take it back forcibly. I think the people were not – even the in-laws the way they are smart today were not so smart then – they could not imagine that a group of women would barge in with the daughter-in-law and take out whatever they want and walk away things. So issue was more of violence than dowry, atleast in Bombay. Because there very few women with huge dowry because of class character.

L The class character of those who approached Forum?

S They were not from upper class - most of them. It started much later upper class women actually approaching womens group. So upper class - one of the women who approached the Center was Smita Patil and that was mainly for whatever personal trauma she may have been going through because – we didn't discuss it – she talked with Flavia etc but she helped us to organize a premier which raised money to buy place for the first place for the Center. Ok. I think she was an exception. I think that is why people respected her because she could come talk to a group and talk personal problem to a women's group, which was not done by women from upper class to that extent.

L Except may be I think Rinki, Rinki was also

S Ya, but again there was no in Rinki's case I mean there was not a question of dowry – it was violence. Rinki did approach much later.

L There are two things that I would like to cover – you see which you would like to take up first. One is you know Forum has always played a role and you in particular in national mobilization symbolized mainly through the conferences and the NCC and bringing groups together and it played a very important role in doing that – that is one thing I would like you to talk about and the other one is uh a slow emergence and how do you see it of identity politics – of religion, caste, sexuality identities and how that has impacted Forum and your activism personally. How do you see it from your location?

S See the very first conference 1980s that again it just arose out of necessity. What one saw as skewed laws –not giving justice to women. The first conference was around laws –right. So obviously because of the experience of Forum of Forum against Rape it was very important for us to have a national level debate and challenge the laws. So that is how Forum got involved because no change in law can come about by a local group talking. So that is how the first conference got this thing. By the time the second Conference came we had started debating issues of personal violence.

L 85

S 85 So domestic violence had come into picture, personal laws had come into the picture. In fact first time Forum was tackling with issues faced by the Muslim

women because Shahnaz Sheikh uh we – it actually happened accidentally because where I stay Shahnaz used to stay in the next lane as a PG.

L Where was that?

S In the next lane –parallel to this is a house where old women give PG accommodation to women and one of my friends used to stay there as a PG and one day Shahnaz just disappeared so she came to me and told me this is the girl who used to stay with me and for few days she is not to be seen. So we started helping out and we figured out that she had gone to Delhi to file a case in the Supreme Court challenging Muslim personal law. And the person who was helping her was a right wing – Hindu right wing person uh so then we got in touch with her. Then she changed her lawyer to Indira Jaising and all that happened. So then we got acquainted with issues faced by Muslim women and the personal law. So the whole debate around personal laws started around that time. At that time

L By that time she had already left her husband?

S She had been thrown out by her husband and that is why she had been staying as a PG. She did not want to go back to her parents because her parents had got her married off to this guy. And she didn't want to go back to the parents either. So she was staying as a PG and then she took up a job through some person and that person where she was working got her in touch with this right wing person and she filed challenging triple talaq. Because that is how she was thrown out by pronouncing triple talaq. Her husband was a professor in a college. So we had demonstrated there also in front of his college at that time. At that time issues of domestic violence and personal law came up. So again we required action at national level if we wanted any change. So there was no choice but to call a national level convention. So it got called because of the necessity felt to either in terms of challenging the personal laws or the situation of domestic violence. So the 1985 Conference came about because we needed a national voice to challenge all this. And the debated and we debated different experiments done by groups around organizing – the structures we were experimenting with so there these kind of issues which could not be dealt with or resolved at state level or local level. So there was a need for the National Conference –need arising out of our day to day experience -that is how we saw it. 1985 conference also happened in the same conference in Bombay – Khar and

L How many groups turned up?

S I think the number had doubled uh I think there were around 400 women this time or even more. Um I mean the groups which participated before also participated with additional groups from different parts of India. So we debated personal laws. And then there was a difference like uh We actually wanted one law governing all women which was then called UCC, right? So uh at the same time asking for reforms within the personal law so within Forum there was more trend towards having one law for all the women uh what we called gender just laws even then but also the fact that Shahnaz herself had filed the petition asking for change in Muslim personal law – we also thought we can have both the positions. We didn't have to stick to one position so some people argued for

reforms in personal law we said we can do both. We had taken both the issues – asking for gender just laws for all women as well as personal laws. And then it almost became an expectation that every four years we must have a national conference and then very consciously a body like NCC was formed?

L Was it after the 2<sup>nd</sup> itself?

S I don't remember whether after 2<sup>nd</sup> Conference. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Conference happened at Patna. But between the 2<sup>nd</sup> Conference and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Conference then it did happen - maybe did not call it National Coordination Committee but I remember to discuss what issues to take up I remember 2-3 meetings. One in Delhi. Then the inputs started coming from all the groups – what are the issues we need to take up. So then almost before every conference there would be 2-3 meetings where various groups would say we want to take up this issue, we want to take up this issue there would be laundry list of all the issues. (laughs)

L How did you see Forum's leadership in these conferences? I mean it was very clear that Forum was taking the initiative and therefore in a more not in vanguard or something but a leadership role of keeping the people together – was that scene as a natural outcome for a group which had been in existence for 5-8 years or was there a discomfort?

S I think by 87 it was not only forum I think a lot more groups were participating

L Participating yes but

S And even taking the initiative.

L Everyone looked to Forum to start off the dialogue

S I guess so

L I think it continued right up to the Calcutta Conference – was it taken as

S Ya

L So Was that seen as in the spirit of collective functioning something to be uneasy about or was that yes we are initiating it.

S Ya I don't think there was any problem, except much later phase. That also because of certain issues – political issues but say for example I mean organising any conference of this nature and magnitude without funding is an enormous task – and the experience of people who had been in previous conferences was valued very much so uh the I and since all the issues that were taken up were done very democratically so I don't think anybody resented Forum taking up. Uh and the venue would be collectively discussed and figured out so there were no issues in terms of that. The issues started coming were I think it was more for the Calcutta conference – issues involving the transgender for example - whether transgender people should be allowed to be part of the conference or not. On those issue people must have resented Forum's position.

They may have felt that Forum was trying to force their views because they happened to be all the conferences. That is a possibility.

L What about before around the Calicut conference – the whole issue of autonomy when it opened up and the government-sponsored programs – you know Mahila Samakhya and all. I remember there was this big meeting in Bombay where there was almost like a split or fall out when a lot of NGOs and groups associated with the government programs felt that they should be also a part of the NCC. And at that time there was a big discussion about what is really autonomous

S Ya, you are right

L And I remember Forum took the a sort of firm position which came from having being in the forefront of the autonomous women's movement. Do you remember those debates?

S Yes, yes. Actually it happened right after Calicut Conference, right. After Calicut, actually even Calicut Conference the venue was also little bit controversial, because of the left situation and some people in Kerala didn't want it in Calicut to be. Anyway that was not Forum's decision or even major role played by the Forum. It was by the local groups also. Post Calicut – one of the government run programs in Rajasthan – some woman got thrown out of a job and the trigger was they attended the Calicut conference and not as part of WDP – Women's Development Program but as a separate group. So at that time there was a fact finding mission and I would say the crack in the women's movement – I wouldn't say crack in the women's movement but I would definitely say groups working with the state government or government agencies and groups who were not working with State became more evident so groups who were working with the government programs like WDP they felt justified in throwing out those women and the debate became more heated in terms of autonomy at that time. Then it got little spilled over even in terms of mass organizations. What happens to organizations like – I remember it got discussed in Bombay where somebody from WDP program had been present and was asked not to be part of it. Some people felt very very upset. I remember the Delhi Group – Shalini – Shakti-Shalini they felt very upset at the way it was articulated that these government run programs cannot be part of NCC. What was felt was that they cannot be part of NCC. They can attend the Conference but they can't come in the decision making process. At the same time I remember somebody from Kashtkari Sanghathana – saying that we are a mixed group and we have a right to be part of NCC and that was also heavily debated and it was said – 'look why can't you have a women's group within Kashtkari Sangathana then participate. But I don't think that was uh I think there I guess Forum must have played some role but I don't think Forum could have – I don't recollect that Forum could have forced the decision on people because people were very actively involved in decision making but I guess Forum's voice did matter saying that it has to be decided by women and women led groups. I think that was just at the beginning of NGOs coming up. Today there won't be an issue like Kashtkari Sangathana coming up.

L Why, why do you say that?

- S Uh Today I think the whole thing has fizzled out, right? And you have women headed NGOs who employ men –so it's no longer – it's no longer see a womens group and then a coalition. It is a women's group started for women and now employs men. So now –actually this question did come up for discussion subsequently that if women NGOs employ men then what do we say – how how do we look at that group? The question and the nature little bit changed.
- L The question now also is who is a woman?
- S Yes laughs Correct!
- L So laughing how do you actually
- S That's what I meant that the whole debate – the debate about transgender – whether transgender should be allowed to attend conference or not –the Calcutta Conference. Finally it was decided that they can attend the Conference. They can't stay in the venue but they did stay in the venue also.
- L What was the Forum position just to..
- S Actually there was lot of debate within Forum. It was not very clear what Forum as a whole felt –uh I would say it was not a unanimous thing – whether like say whether Forum itself should be open to transgender person or not– I don't think there was any unanimous voice on that. So if it would happen –it happened, but it wasn't that yes we should include transgender.
- L What is your view on the matter?
- S uh I felt even that time I felt –again this is not unanimous feeling within the Forum. I said if we want NCC to take a decision – we should actually have people from the transgender group come to NCC and argue it out, okay. Whereas some people within Forum also said –look why do we need – say I am there - I don't identify myself as a woman but as a transgender uh – but I don't think everybody felt comfortable with that – comfortable I mean agreed with that notion. So I personally feel the nature of the discussion would have changed if actual transgender groups who wanted to be part of the Conference had come and presented their point of view to NCC. It didn't happen because of various reasons - either lack of time, lack of coordination but if that had happened it would have greatly benefited NCC also and other groups.
- L But don't you think that would have been a position that women's groups themselves had, you know independent of what they heard of didn't hear?
- S Of course women's groups I think a lot of women's groups were opposed to it – allowing transgender. I think majority women's group were opposed to it. In fact one of the things they said is that see there is a normal I mean in the outside world women do interact with what we call hijra in India. And many women are either petrified or scared of them and then they would not feel comfortable in the same venue – stay in the same venue where hijras were also staying with them – that was the argument given. Majority of groups were opposed to it,



that's why the decision was not to allow them to stay. So what was told was say Sangama for example –yes,that you can stay outside the venue and participate in the conference, but you cannot stay in the venue. That was the final decision.

- L Do you see I mean this whole definition of you know what is a woman and discussion around gender – gender not in the other gender– where it is used as synonymous with women's rights. Nowadays people don't talk so much about women's rights but gender issues – not in that sense - looking at gender as a category. And do you think women's movement as moved to a space where that can be mixed in a mixed environment or is there still need for women only spaces, conferences or groups?
- S No I think we are in a position – I feel pretty confident that we can – but again I am talking in terms of urban context. I am not very sure what happens in rural context because I would say the kind of hostility which comes up. I am talking more in terms of people who openly speak out and who would belong to marginalized genders – their safety from that point of view I would say – whether we could move in the open space or not is doubtful. Because I think there can be vicious attacks on them. So I don't think politically we require women only spaces but we require spaces because of the kind of harsh reality which people face in terms of coming out openly.
- L And how do you see this other trend of identity politics – given a larger context of rising communal and religious identity, hardening of caste identity – how do you see that impacting your activism personally?
- S I think not only my activism – I think it is usually doing a lot of disservice to the movement I would say. See identity politics at one point, I would say even the way women's movement started – it was definitely a women-only space and women as identity. Whatever we saw, I remember when we had discussion around caste, for example okay, most of the cases we take up – we took up were not from upper caste or upper class or majority religion also. Mathura was an adivasi woman. So it is not that we fought for women who belonged to our caste or our class or our religion. Uh but we did have this vague notion of all women being same, right. So when we took up Mathura's issue – we did not specifically address her tribal status but we addressed her as a woman who was or even she was a minor at that time, who was attacked. So were not conscious of other identities because we identified with one identity as a woman. But I think it had potential at that time in terms of impacting society. And I think it had hugely impact on society in terms of the way patriarchy was practiced –it definitely had huge impact. But if I look at today the way all identity politics is getting played I don't think it is having a positive impact whether it is caste or whether it is including gender, because even if I look at Forum –initial part of Forum where a lot of women who felt discriminated –political or other grounds from upper class became part of Forum and Forum was a space where they were fighting their own struggles for their own identity. Uh today that basis itself doesn't exist I would say uh in the sense that for various reasons. If I think about the same age group women today in urban areas – they don't require a group like Forum. They don't need a collective to fight for their rights. The situation has much changed for them. They don't – the way we felt the need for a collective – they don't feel the need for a collective. In between period – that was a period also

later where a lot of women who would come to Forum would be migrant women I would say –migrant in the sense they actually had the strength to leave their parental home, come to Bombay and live on their own and they needed a collective space as they were facing issues being migrant woman as woman as well as being migrant woman without the traditional family structure support, right. So they required Forum as a space. Today even migrant women in Bombay don't require that collective because the way society has evolved and I don't know to what extent to take the credit as part of women's movement, but it has had a huge impact where women are in a position – migrant women live on their own terms in a city like Bombay.

L Could you speak about this a little more like one or two examples of what has specifically changed?

S Uh What has specifically changed is uh....the availability of the kind of places uh the fact that they can be entirely on their own – a single woman living by herself uh is okay as long as she is able to pay the rent it is accepted. Which was not the case before, okay I would say today the rents are exorbitant – so the women have to well paid, that time rents were not exorbitant, but the fact is that it is not very easy for a single woman to find a place. And whether it was her workplace she had to struggle for gender equality. Today it is not that bad.

L For a certain class of women.

S I am talking of a certain class of women, even then there was a certain class of women who were coming to Forum and if I look at that class today – that class doesn't require Forum. What I mean is caste and class both I am talking about

L That would be upper and upper middle or even middle middle class?

S Uh

L Like professional

S Ya professional basically –professional women. Most of them were teaching in either colleges or journalists or doctors or engineers or whatever but professional women. Ok, so they don't require a collective like Forum. So then actually came a period where lot of queer women – it was very important for them that Forum exist because there was not enough space outside. Today even that is not required. Today post-377 or even little before that – there was much more openness and there was a possibility of these groups existing uh without a collective like Forum. I remember one of the meetings where we had a discussion where a queer group like LABIA, it was not called LABIA then but Stree Sangam or something was present. That discussion was around sexual harassment at workplace or something and we had a conference – a press conference in Bombay. And it was not easy for a queer woman to come and talk. We were talking about opposing gender neutrality and their were some lgbt groups which were talking that you know we should make it gender neutral because of various reasons. But as Forum as well as whatever the lesbian groups we were in touch –they did not want gender neutrality in sexual harassment as well as sexual assault both. We held a press conference following that – it was

not easy for a woman who belonged to a queer group to talk in the press. Still one – one of us - she made a bold attempt and she did speak. She didn't clearly identify herself as queer but it was indicated. Unn she was staying with her friends in one of the suburbs of Bombay. They had to leave that house. The moment it got published in paper – the society asked them to leave. You know that kind of discrimination – I am not saying that kind of discrimination does not exist today but it was not possible for them to go anywhere else but to have a collective like Forum. So today Forum does not even serve that purpose because you could have queer collectives openly functioning and so the queer women who basically because of their identity as queer uh would come to Forum they need not come to Forum. So I would say to a large extent even the queer identity has also lost its radical impact in terms of – when I say radical impact where you actually challenge the social structure and social injustice and you do not get co-opted within the current framework. Whether woman as identity, whether caste as identity, whether queer as identity –I think today the structure is in a position to co-opt all these identities absolutely. In fact a very important thing is we had –we initiated a dialogue on - we made an attempt talking to all the tribal groups in Maharashtra. Second we also made an attempt to talk to all the dalit groups. Again women in tribal as well as dalit section. And both we couldn't make much headway. On the caste level what we realized is that the older women who would probably be even elder to me by few years who were part of the Ambedkar movement at one point, were very keen on you know having this women's group and caste together, but the younger generation in the dalit group – they were not interested much because I think somewhere they felt restricted by being identified only as dalits. So they wanted to be part of the mainstream and still be acknowledged also– it was not that they didn't want to be acknowledged for their – for being dalit and being part of the mainstream. But they were not keen on only being identified as dalit – they didn't want that. Whereas you could see that as a generation gap even among dalits. Same thing about adivasi groups. We held actually two or three meetings Maharashtra level and we also felt that we should have adivasi women to – we would support some of the adivasi women activists to take up these issues and work around at Maharashtra level. And that was the period even in Maharashtra when the adivasi movement changed. And they started what they called 'Adivasi Ekta' and they didn't want any non-adviasis. So again assertion of identity politics and in that process the women also got totally sidelined so the Adivasi Ekta is predominantly only men – adivasi men but they come from all sections. They are MLA, ministers –so everybody is a part of it. They have annual convention I think sometime around 13-14 January. This has now become four state level – MP, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Rajasthan. So all these states are together and they hardly touch issues of adivasi women at all. In fact whatever I have heard – they would have one session on adivasi women but it would get postponed so much so that it would not find space at all. So I think the identity as adivasi have also suppressed divisions within adivasis whether it is class or gender. So I find identity politics not able to challenge

- L How about – how about religious identity –given the history post 90s of this personalized religious identity because I know you personally as well as Forum has tried to work with Awaz-e-Niswan looking at Muslim women mobilizing separately as well as a kind of broader progressive linkage. So do you think that

could have been done through a group like Forum itself or how do you see the actual mobilizing of women's group based on religious identity?

S Uh Ya I mean I feel now, particularly in today's context, see we started actually along with along with Awaz-e-Niswan started being part of a national level Muslim women's rights network which started in 1988.

L 1988!

S First meeting was held in Bombay only. I don't recollect how many meetings but many meetings happened over a period. Meetings happened in Hyderabad, Kanpur, Calcutta, Bombay, Nagpur – quite a few places. And uh Gujarat also – Baroda was one place. We got very good response from women from Muslim community initially. Uh in fact I remember people associated with CPM also came and in fact the women who were working with CPM – they spoke out that they were with CPM for so many years but they have always taken issues of uh you know of the marginalized community as such- whether it is the denial of ration card to Muslim women or whatever citizenship rights. But they share that say a woman who has been given triple talaq – that issue is never taken up by CPM. Okay, so this was the first time talking about their own issues. They had come on as CPM women but they for the first time spoke about issues they talked about issues within the community as women. We also actually decided to challenge the Muslim personal law at the national level. In fact we had got lawyers next few conferences. We drafted the petition also. Uh this was quite so even post Gujarat situation. Post Gujarat also quite a few groups came and they spoke about how even in the relief work women were not given. Like for example if houses are built – they were not necessarily in the women's name. So issues within the communities were brought forth, but it changed slowly. Uh I remember one meeting we had where even Shareefa from South had come – quite a few women spoke that they were working as human rights activists – part of women's movement – first time they felt that their Muslim identity was pointed out to them. And for the first time they felt as though they have to fight for their identity. Otherwise they would fight in general as women in general or human rights activist. And I think the identity – the way the Muslim community was targeted actually took it's toll and the network split. A big chunk of the network decided that they don't want to challenge sharia or that they want to work within the framework of Islam. They don't want to work – I mean they will speak about human rights but as long as they are within the framework of Islam. Uh So I would say the identity as a community actually overpowered the whole process.

L How many non-Muslims were there in this network?

S Very few

L Like about 5%

S Ya 5% you can say

L And was there a discussion about non-Muslims being part of the network or was it

- S No. It was just - that we would focus on Muslim women's rights so it doesn't matter. So I remember Kalindi Deshpande from CPM or CPI
- L CPM
- S CPM used to come. Like I used to always attend as Forum. And it -that was never raised as an issue – everyone was quite okay with it.
- L But by this time Awaz-e-Niswan was already formed?
- S Awaz-e-Niswan was formed in 86 itself.
- L So Awaz-e-Niswan was –some of the women from Forum were also there?
- S No were never part of Awaz-e-Niswan.
- L But Awaz-e-Niswan women were part of Forum?
- S Ya
- L So was there any discussion in Forum about something like this happening, like the way the network 10-12 years later there was a mixed group talking about Muslim women's rights – so was there any discussion around 85-86 that the entire group of a mixed religious whatever –secular group can also take up Muslim women's rights or was it almost given as a natural thing that Muslim women will come out of Forum and form this organisation? How was –how did that discussion happen
- S See Awaz-e-Niswan always had a separate existence. It did not come out of Forum.
- L But some women were common, right?
- S Very few women were common – like one could say Shahnaz
- L And Hasina I guess
- S Hasina came much later right
- L She was never part of Forum?
- S She was no, she was part of Awaz-e-Niswan. She started, see what happened post 92-93 Shahnaz withdrew, Okay, that is when people like Hasina, Yasmin and all started taking initiative. And later on Hasina and all started coming to Forum. But otherwise initially it was only Shahnaz.
- L So how was that viewed in Forum? Because I think wasn't it one of the first Muslim women's groups – I mean a progressive Muslim women's groups – probably in the country?

S Ya, ya

L So was that viewed somewhere as a departure from the idea of you know solidarity of all women or was it not at all

S No, no it was debated. I remember some other groups had questioned Awaz-e-Niswan about their separate existence – group like Stri Kruti for that matter, but as Forum we felt it was absolutely essential if Muslim women felt the need to organize separately, yes we would support them and we understand why they would want to be and very consciously none of us became part of - members of Awaz-e-Niswan. But it was not only religious identity, it was also class. We felt that from the kind of privileges we were coming from would you know uh definitely be participating as equal – that was the reason we never wanted to be part of Awaz-e-Niswan very consciously at least. So uh but we were supportive of it being a separate group. Because lot of I can understand – lot of cultural issues. For example Awaz-e-Niswan had a big debate within Awaz-e-Niswan as to whether they should allow people doing namaz inside the organization office, okay. It is – I don't think it would have been a really good idea laughs that we people also participate in that discussion or decision making. They took a decision that they would not have. Ok. I think it was much healthier that way.

L Was there any discussion about wearing the burqa or hijab and looking upon that you know as a symbol of women's oppression or was

S I think it was taken for granted that it was a symbol of women's oppression. There was no doubt about it. It was not so prevalent initially. In fact, very few women in Awaz-e-Niswan would wear burqa at that time. And in fact almost

L And now?

S Miniscule women. Now there a lot – lot of women. I am not saying the activist of Awaz-e-Niswan but the women who come to Awaz-e-Niswan. Even the women who approach Awaz-e-Niswan never used to wear burqa so much in those days. Now it is almost every

L Is it post Gujarat or post 93 riots?

S Uh post 93 riots it started. Post Gujarat to much much more but it started happening post 93 riots.

L And what was – that I would like you talk a little more about – how do you remember the riots and uh how did you feel as an activist while that was happening around you?

S Ya, ya I think it was very bad

L What is your first memory of the period? After 6<sup>th</sup> December what is your next memory after 6<sup>th</sup> December?

S See were actually a lot of people were staying here in this house only – I don't remember why. I think we were just lot of people around. I remember Shiraz

Bulsara was here, Pradip Prabhu was here, Bhushan was here – we just whatever reason and I was going out for a meeting I think it was a Saturday or something. And I walked out and I saw people burning things on the road. It was really .. I mean you know I don't know whether we were so naïve politically that we did not expect Bombay to burn, because Bombay never had communal tension before, the way Gujarat has faced. Bombay never ever had communal tension. So I was totally taken aback!

L Where was this you walked down?

S Here! in Dadar! And I was totally shocked and those days there were no phones etc, right. So we tried to inform people that something like this happening. There were policemen standing there. I saw a booth being burnt. I went to the police and said “look this is happening”. He just walked the other way around. And it was really like a total shock for us and what unfolded was absolutely shocking. We couldn't believe this is the same city we knew.

L Is this area a known Shiv Sena area?

S This is a Shiv Sena area.

L So could you recognize people who were doing it?

S Yes, yes. See this was a Shiv Sena much before, because I remember in 68 Shiv Sena had started an agitation against South Indians. That time all this whole area – every Udupi restaurant was attacked and burnt. And lot of people in this basti – this lane also participated in that. And I remember policemen coming and picking up some of them. So u h but there is also a near market –inside there is a area – there is a masjid and around that masjid a lot of muslim people stay. I was not even aware of the masjid because you know it is such a crowded market na, nobody it was not at all in our consciousness to recognize a person as Hindu and Muslim till then. Till then as I said post 95 we recognized issues faced by Muslim women but we did not realize the way minority would be targeted as muslims. So it was a absolute shock. In fact it took us one-two days before we could go to Awaz-e-Niswan area because there was a complete curfew in that area. See the whole Hindu area there was no curfew.

L Do you remember when this was –in December itself?

S Ya in December itself.

L So that day you went out for a meeting, did you reach where you were going or

S No

L You just came back home.

S Ya. We came back and just got people around and its Saturday, I mean what I saw was probably was it just blew up in no time.

L Did you have TV then? Was there?

S No there was no TV.

L So how did you know what was happening?

S Uh

L There were people ringing up?

S People ringing up and un on radio. People ringing up because we had very live contact with people in Awaz-e-Niswan – so some of their relatives were trapped in areas. So in fact somebody told us about a relative being trapped near Pratiksha Nagar and three of us

L This was after the blasts, right?

S No, blast happened after this. After the riot, after. It was absolute targeted – like even a handcart belonging to a Muslim was targeted and burnt.

L So after the Masjid was demolished

S Ya

L And everybody knew about it by evening. There was no expectation that there would be something like this?

S There was, See after the Masjid was demolished – there was some kind of violence in the Muslim dominated areas. They had a police chowki. They didn't attack people –other people– they attacked a police chowki. But I think there was a planning by Shiv Sena or whatever –the right wing. So ..and then they say there was a trigger of two people getting killed in the port – Bombay Port Trust. But I think the atmosphere was ripe –made ready by Rath-Yatra and things like that, right and so it just spread. And so we had to – when we went the Awaz-e-Niswan women – one of the Awaz-e-Niswan women's house we went first to meet, after the curfew was lifted. Because in the Muslim area the curfew used to be round the clock. It was only in the Hindu area there was no curfew. And the way they bombarded us, because they could only talk to us. At that time (small laugh) we were coming from the majority community, right and we were totally – we didn't know – we felt totally guilty for what was happening. So but at least we felt happy that at least they could pour their heart out, even shout at us for belonging to the majority community.

L Did you know anybody who lost friends or family members?

S That time?

L in the violence?

S Ya in the Muslim area – I did.

L People directly involved in that



S Ya

L Can you remember any particular one?

S Uh.....I don't remember the exact name but this was a woman who was staying in Bhandi Bazaar and her sister was staying in Pratiksha Nagar. And in fact three of us tried to go to fetch her out– we could not even reach her house because the mob was totally violent –Hindu mob. Her name was Faryad and I don't remember her sister's name. But Awaz-e-Niswan women themselves were not– none of them were in that sense directly

L Like after 84, Bombay was much affected, Bhiwandi was I guess, Bombay was not affected by the Sikh massacres and even in Gujarat and the Sikh thing – what was pretty clear was that class was no protection. There were very well off, well-to-do Sikh families – men who were slaughtered. In 2002 we saw that in Gujarat. During the 92-93 riots in Bombay – did you see that or was class some kind of a protection? Or

S No, it wasn't.

L Even rich muslims feel equally persecuted?

S Absolutely. Rich people also felt persecuted. People removed their nameplate from their doors. They felt. They felt threatened. They were attacked also. Class was not –it was not very ....See that time ghettoisation – ghettoisation is extreme now – at that time it wasn't so- but they had figured out na – they had actually done surveys and figured out where muslims stay even in the mixed bastis.

L What about in buildings like this? Would this

S Buildings like this people were attacked. Targetted – Muslims were targeted. People who were known – like I remember one particular person – a Muslim who was teaching Sanskrit – his house was attacked. Isolated and attacked because in the whole building there were only one or two Muslim households. They were attacked. So I don't think class was any protection.

L And after that did you see any hardening of positions uh within groups like Awaz-e-Niswan or this network? You know more rigid religious identity things?

S Not really. Because a lot of women in Awaz-e-Niswan would come and share with us. See we got involved in relief camps, everything. So uh they wouldn't hesitate – in fact they would tell us also because it is not that nobody from Muslim community would attack Hindus, right. So they would come and tell us what happens in their lane also – which is Muslim dominated areas. How muslims also attack people walking in and things like that. Uh but they would also tell us that how this opportunity is used by some men to get rid of women – u know using violence whatever but blaming it on right wing. So uh I did not find, for example some of the relief camps – religious people used to come and they would read istema. I think lot of credit goes to Shahnaz for that. Because

she continuously had a dialogue with women in Awaz-e-Niswan also. So any kind of – like whichever relief camp we would be active in –uh – there would be strong resistance to the religious fanatics coming and preaching certain things within the religion. Its not that we could control it as such but there was enough attempt made. And I think lot of credit goes to Shahnaz for that.

L What is Shahnaz doing now? Where is she?

S Uh she actually post 92-93 na uh –initially throughout the relief camp she participated quite a lot. Post 93 she took a distance and she decided not to be part of the movement. I think she somewhere felt let down – I think a lot to do with the Muslim community itself – because uh the Muslim men particularly the youth uh they sort of supported her –thinking that she would – she can be a leader figure, right. But she didn't get enough support from them to do whatever she wanted to do. And for various reasons – she got totally disillusioned and moved away. She became uh like a –more like a spiritual person. She has gone into Reiki and things like that. So, she doesn't even now if we contact her, no – she does not want to have anything to do with the group or movement – she flatly says no - she doesn't want to. Shesays – she does do counseling for children for example in the school and all. And she says if there are women who need counseling – I am there but I don't want to be part of a struggle or a movement or a collective.

L And is Forum's composition – right now –uh more or less the same as it was in 1980-81 in terms of being more Hindu or rather I mean women from Hindu families –middle class, upper class or has that changed?

S Uh No. It is not so much Hindu. There are lot of Christians, few dalits uh so I don't think it is – one can say 50% Hindus but there are a lot of other religions Muslims, Christians, dalits are there part of Forum. So that way it is little different. Uh today the class composition is very different, right. I wouldn't call Forum as a rich organisation –people belonging to upper middle class also. Some of us are there but not everybody. That time 1980s I would say Forum was far more upper class than today. Because the way class today gets identified, I mean the gap between rich and poor is becoming so wide that – but I think Forum is not the same. The reason being that identity women as identity itself – woman as identity – is no longer that can challenge the current social structure.

L Is it also – I mean one sees a lot of spontaneous mobilization by groups not necessarily led by either women's groups or human rights groups or trade unions. Whenever there is an instance, and it is not only in Bombay, I have seen it in several cities specially- where there is an incident and there is lot of – you know like citizenry – up in arms, coming out. Even the Marine Drive incident and so on which happened. Do you feel that in a way making women's groups a little less burdened or responsible for leading such things or is that those groups are coming up because the women's movement is not taking leadership?

S I don't know. See for example the Marine Drive thing, no – we had to slog. I don't think it happened spontaneously. We had to do lot of work for that. Yes lot of students did join, but uh if we had not slogged – it wouldn't have happened.

- L Bombay, actually it may not be. But in Delhi
- S Delhi is different
- L Like the Jessica Lal thing or Priya Mattoo or any of these high profile type of cases – it has not been women’s groups
- S I know! It is very different – this slut walk for example
- L That’s no women’s groups have
- S But in Bombay for example what happened in the TISS campus – the girl who was sexually assaulted and the way media covered it. We had to slog again there! It wasn’t – it wasn’t – Yes TISS students did join but one wouldn’t say they took the initiative. So, if we don’t do it – it doesn’t happen in Bombay. And I mean I am talking of issues which specifically – yes there are lots of NGOs. Say for example the group which we started about sex pre-selection or whatever it is – now none of us from Forum are active in that but you have NGOs. So I wouldn’t say that it is spontaneous. Yes things are taken up by NGOs
- L You know like
- S Lots of NGOs. Like Flavia is part of Majlis which is again an NGO. They do take up even conflict issues.
- L Like say in Bengal –say the whole agitation literally over this Rizwanur Rehman killing or death whatever, Singrur or Nandigram – where so many women are active – the lead has not come from women’s groups. Whether it is protesting against the rape and sexual assault or generally even women’s issues like allotment of pattas or the compensation or this and that and yet that has been a mobilization, you know. Not really spontaneous but not led by women’s groups and that seems to be a phenomenon, which very curiously seems to be happening in cities. How do you see that kind of mobilization – in a way thirty years after the launch of the women’s movement?
- S No ..I think it is most welcome! It should – it should happen because otherwise we would say that the movement had no impact. So...but at the same time I think there are lot of issues which are not getting addressed. There is nobody to address those issues and they are like –say..for example, what we spoke about – the Muslim women’s issues. Okay, today you have something called Bhartiya Muslim Mahila Andolan uh but -it has apparently a huge membership also but I don’t see them taking up, you know they would talk more for the community than for women’s equal rights. Okay, for example who is there to talk about this section? Or recently we started something about Kandhamal and addressing the issue of women in Kandhamal, particularly 2008 attack on Christians. aa..nobody seems to be taking up those issues. I think there are lots of groups which don’t fall into the well formed identities, okay. Or they are not the strong identities. For example Dalit Christians is not a strong identity because neither Dalits – Dalits which are I would say, there are –say the Ambedkar movement – they are not as inclusive to take over – to take the question of Dalit Christians also. And Christian – Christian as a religious minority doesn’t talk about justice,

frankly speaking – that is what I have seen. So there is nobody to talk about the issues faced by them. So there are a lot of sections which are – these issues are just not taken up. And I think – they definitely don't fall into one identity or the other. So those are the issues which I think, I am not saying as women's movement, but today that's what I feel –sometimes I feel – say when I look at Mihir or people like Mihir –uh who are radical in ideology but who are upper class, upper caste, male – I feel many of us fall into that category today, where we don't have – you know the kind of struggles we had to do as being women in 80s – we don't need to do that kind of thing today. Uh so we are left as an organization which should fight for issues which are very very important and which challenge the status quo – we don't have an organization like that anymore. And you can say the slut walk but you know they don't have the lasting impact. They come up and they go. They cannot be translated into a consistent challenge to the current social structure. So those groups absolutely – I think they do very important job including the slut walk. All the talk you know that it only talks about elite women – I don't think so- because a slut is called irrespective of what class or caste you belong to. Maybe that word is not known but randi – one should call a 'randi walk' (laughs), ok, because that is what is normally used very commonly in all sectors of society. So those I think they do play a very important role and we should be part of that as feminists. But I don't think they have a potential to pose a consistent challenge. They come and go. They are like waves in sea. They don't form something solid which can challenge the social structure.

- L One thing you were talking about is you know consistently you have been talking about the links between feminist progressive ideology and Marxist or leftist progressive ideology as reflected in class movements, trade union movement. What about the civil rights movement? How do you remember the Forum of 1980 and interlinkages or cross membership with –you know either Lok Shahi Haq Sangathana – was it not there or CPDR? Because in many other cities I think post –Emergency I think there was a lot of cross membership – a lot of working together with civil rights groups. So did that happen in Bombay? Was it very much part of the political culture?

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Tape 2

Sandhya Gokhale Interview 2

- S Actually Bombay is pretty weak on civil rights movement, very, very weak. We had Lok Shahi Haq Sangathan and CPDR. See Forum has no issues about membership, right. Anybody as long as you are a woman can become a member. So we have been going to CPDR. Lok Shahi Sangathana people – Nandita Shah used to be part of Lok Shahi at one time. So that not – it was a non-issue. But these organisations were never strong in India, in Bombay. Pretty weak, I would say. Even today we don't have a strong organization. We have Binayak Sen Release Committee.
- L Is that because – the repression was never so strong say as in Delhi because it was more of a political hub kind of thing or was there more of a law and order kind of situation here or –what explains that?

S Ya, I think Delhi is very different, right. For example students in Delhi you get students from all over India - automatically there is lot of political churning and political unrest and definitely uh See all the civil rights movement – actually the membership comes mainly from student groups, right. Also basically intelligentsia –either teaching in universities or whatever it is. Bombay is such a commercial place - that for example humanities have no place in Bombay. To some extent, even today including Binayak Sen Committee and all - you will find participation of students from TISS, ok, but you won't find. In 80s yes we had a strong students movement but post that movement – where do these civil rights groups get their membership from. There is no such culture in Bombay. So because uh it does not mean that there is no issue –like in Bombay today we don't have a single place where you can protest. We have only a small square in Azad Maidan. You cannot protest outside it. But we have not been able to collectively challenge it, you know. Because legally you cannot challenge it – there is no way. We tried challenging it – it is of no use. And sporadically depending upon your mobilization –you can do a protest without police permission. But I remember even issues like Khairalanji before our protest could start – we had been picked up by the police and put inside. Uh but there is no collective opposition to that. Somehow it has not happened. Civil right is pretty weak. Even today, one of the activist who is inside Sudhir Doudhe – I think somewhere associated with ML but Dalit activist, whom we all know very well- we have not been able to organize even proper protest against his arrest, you know. Today there is a meeting. And now Binayak Sen is coming on 16<sup>th</sup> or something to Bombay so along with that we will take up his issue. A demonstration was planned for his arrest, but even for the planning meeting nobody turned up – so even the demonstration could not take place.

L What grounds has he been picked up? 3.45

S Uh associated – because he is a member of – State Committee member of People's War Group. But he was a very active a..Dalit writer – he is used to bring out a magazine. He wasn't working underground. And directly one cannot say he was involved in any violence. He was very active in post-Khairalanji movement –Ramabai Ambedkar that where firing happened – Dalit group.

L So the question then of a feminist kind of consciousness within civil rights movement doesn't

S It's really tough. Its so tough. Post-Khairlanji when we started working – there is this group is formed where quite a few of us from Forum would also go. See it is very difficult to talk on gender issues. See one case came uh – where a dalit girl was paraded naked in a basti. She was paraded naked in a basti because her brother was accused of sexually assaulting a five-year old child in the same basti. Everybody belonging to the same economic strata. Uh this family the girl and her brother – they were budhist. The five year old girl who was attacked was from UP –not a Buddhist and not a Maharashtrian. Now the child rights people had taken up this girl's issue – we were part of this Dalit group. We had come together basically to take up the issue of Khairalanji –

post-Khairlanji judgment etc. there were quite a few Dalit men activists, few Dalit women –again from older generation. The younger women did not join much. It was the elder Dalit women and we were a part of it. It was a very difficult time for because from whatever we could gather that boy was guilty of sexual assault. The small girl actually recognized him in the parade. I am not even saying that he is guilty or not guilty till proved whatever it is. Uh but what happens to this sister who was paraded became a crucial issue. What happens to the girl and her future was not important to this Dalit group. What was important to them was that she was Dalit and she was paraded naked. So uh they would try to impose restrictions on her – that she shouldn't leave her house because it is very important that she continues to stay there everyday and we continue to take up that issue. Whereas she didn't want to stay there, she – there was another woman – a dalit woman who offered that she can come and stay in her house. Now again there was a gender issue involved. That Dalit women who offered her a place – she was in a relationship with a dalit activist man who had left his first wife and so he had become a untouchable in dalit group for various reasons – but this is without figuring out what the first wife wants –what the second wife wants. The issue is about the male leader. So it was very tough for us to function within that group. So I think – I think we would have had similar experience in civil rights groups to take up gender issues

L When abouts is this incident about being paraded naked?

S This, maybe one and a half year back, as recent as. We, we wanted to definitely take up the that issue but we felt what is important –like say I remember we went to her house and we were talking. A lot of these Dalit men had also come. Uh while talking to her – I asked her – that what she likes you know – so she said she likes dancing, okay (laughs). It was made into a big issue in the next meeting – that these women go and encourage our women to dance – because you see Forum was already targeted for supporting the dance parties. The Dalit groups felt that it was the Dalit women who – you know the whole controversy about caste and gender. Now in that context If I ask the girl what she likes and she says she likes dancing – that is not something that can be tolerated. So uh that girl –actually today wherever she sings – she is actually learning kathak. But the Dalit men didn't like it at all. Didn't like her leaving that house. Their point and their agitation falls flat. They are not interested in her as an individual or a woman.

L What's happening with the dance bar case?

S Its pending in Supreme Court.

L Appeal has not come up?

S Appeal is not coming up for hearing. See, actually it is our mistake that we didn't file a caveat in Supreme Court – so the State got an ex-parte stay on the High Court judgment and that continues.

L So what's the Union doing?

- S The Union is almost defunct.
- L Why is that?
- S I don't think .....
- L Because those women are still here – many of them.
- S They just ..Its very difficult for them to last know without proper means of survival. Most of them were migrants, right. They were not from Bombay. Uh I don't think actually the Union functioned properly, you know. See in those days the dance bars owners actually worked with the Union. In the sense - how would the Union collect membership – they would go to the dance bar okay - how many women employed here? 40, ok. The dance bar owner pays the money to the Union on behalf of the girl. And whatever the girls earn – the money is cut off from their earnings. Because the dance bar owners were very interested in opposing the ban. So the Union – see when we interviewed – we did this study. We interviewed around 500 women. There was no consciousness about the Union. It – one cant even expect. So they were not much bothered about the Union – so the Union as Union hardly functioned, you know. to And now everyone is dispersed. So that's quite sad what happened to a whole lot of women.
- L That was again quite an interesting kind of understanding of caste, gender, sexuality, class.
- S Actually we were able to have quite good discussions with the Dalit women on this issue when we started this whole exercise. And I don't think – I don't think we would have changed their opinion completely but I think it made good point talking to them. They were able to see some of our points, because also you know what happened post the ban – it is for everybody to see –the situation of women became worse – nobody wants the situation of women to become worse, right. So even the Dalit women who were very critical –some of them did change their stand – I wouldn't say all of them but some of them did change their stand.
- L I think we will stop here Sandhya, thanks.

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