

**INTERVIEW TAKEN OF MONISHA BEHAL  
TRANSCRIPTION BY RITUPARNA PATGIRI  
INTERVIEW BY GERALDINE FORBES  
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**CLIP I**

Forbes: - How would you describe yourself?

Behal: - I have always preferred to have a very care free life. I think I was brought up like that and I loved practical things. I did very little reading. It was only when I was in college that I did a lot of reading. I was influenced by my friends, especially people who were in the Left Movement, etc. I would describe myself essentially as a person who is very practical and my work with women in North east comes essentially from the love to help people on one hand, I know it sounds horrible, but also to show to the world that in the North east there are many assets which need to be highlighted, exposed and shown to other parts of India.

Forbes: - What words would you use to describe yourself – would you call yourself a social worker? An activist?

Behal: - With the words that you have offered I would like to say that I am a social development activist. Forbes: - What, then, in your terms, is a social development activist?

Behal: - What I mean by social development activism is we understand the social norms of Indian society. I have experienced living in Assam, in different parts of North east and also a lot in Delhi essentially because of my education there. I also got married to Rana and both of us have shared an ideology of looking at social issues and saying that we need to think about social justice. So when I talk about social development it emanates from this whole world of disparity and injustice. As a person I felt that we would point on to issues which lead to [the] discrimination of people, disparities and frustrations among a lot of women especially. I am talking about North East also. Therefore, I felt that social development would mean to bring in equity, equality, a life that would be much easier than the way women live even now - currently.

Forbes: - You mentioned injustice, disparity and discrimination as three things that have concerned you. So can you go back and think about your childhood and recall events which made you alert to those issues, think about them?

Behal: - As a child I must say I had a very happy childhood and I had extremely liberal parents. I did exactly what I wanted. My mother never stopped me. My father in fact encouraged me to do things which my twin brother would do. I hung around with boys and there was nothing like that. But there were some relatives who told me when I was growing up that it was high time that you became more sober, more constricted, more confined with things that women do, which is, you must wear a mekhala chadar. You must do this, you must do that. But these were comments, which were received with indifference by my father, followed by my mother. But my mother would also say that you know lot of people feel that girls should be like this, so you must also do it. I mean she is a person who follows what society does. But even within that also it was ok for her. I am happy to tell you that when it was my 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> birthday she actually gave me a carpentry set because I loved

making things with wood. But with Tooni, my sister, she would give something else because she really loved feminine things. So it was like that for us.

But as a fact when I was growing older, I felt a lot of anger. It was sometime somewhere in Guwahati. I was with a group of cousins, girls mainly and it was at a fair, a mela. Some boys came and one of them touched me, at the back. And I fought back... I sort of retaliated. And then they caught me and said. 'Listen woman you better watch out. The next time we see you, see what we will do to you.' I was seething in anger, there were tears welling up. My cousins said 'lets go quickly'. This was the first public sort of abuse that I suffered.

Forbes: - How old were you?

Behal: - Probably in 1966- 1967, I was 15, 14 may be. I was born in 1951, 15 September. So that's what happened and I was really angry. When I was in college in Darjeeling, I also felt that a lot of boys would tease us. Naturally we were young, we were carefree. But whenever somebody did this, I would retaliate because I could not stand this humility of being - you know - who would remark at people like us, especially strangers. I could not take it and so I always wanted to fight back. It happened in Delhi throughout. I mean I can give you thousands of examples of how I fought with these people. Till today - abusing women, making slight remarks at women... I can never tolerate. I used to tell my daughter, 'remember if that happens you know what to do, don't you?' And she would tell me, 'No ma, don't worry, I will retaliate in a different way because I can't be aggressive. Things are worse now.' She used to say that when she used to go to college and that's what. I felt very bad.

But there was another kind of more discrimination I felt and which I think has made me what I am today. I was in class IV in Loreto; I was studying in Darjeeling in the boarding. In the bulletin board, there were some pictures of tribals of India and there were the pictures of Bhils, Gonds and there was a face where it was written Assamese. I said to my friends, 'This is not an Assamese.' They asked, " what do you mean..", because they felt Assam was a jungle. I said, "No, this is not an Assamese." I could not explain to them I am an Assamese and all Assamese do not look like that. They do not resemble that picture. A lot of girls as well as teachers would club Assam as a land of black magic, a place which had people who were not very civilized, they are all savages and they eat dogs and cats. They would talk about Assam being a place that would kill people because of mosquitoes (bites), Kala Azar, etc.

It was much later when I read about North East that I realized that a lot of things were true. The Mughals just could not enter Assam because of mosquitoes. They all died or, of course, were rebuffed by the army who were great boatmen, etc. We used to do maps of India in Geography and there would be a place called Assam and I said (to my friends), 'This is Assam and these are the rivers that we have.' and I used to think about these things myself.

It was much later of course, when I was just finishing my M.A., that I started thinking of doing work in Assam. I read a lot then about Assam, the history, the folklore, etc. I started working on what I would call ethnography. I was not trained. I followed what the Brits used to write. Some of them I remember with very bad English in the JSAB, Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal. But it was all very interesting. I did all that and somehow later on at Delhi, much later, I took up a job with Centre for Women's Development Studies.

Forbes: - You went to school first in Guwahati or Tezpur, I assume, and then you went to Darjeeling. Could you just chart your educational journey, because then you went to JNU?

Behal: - I went first to the nursery school which was in Tezpur Mahila Samiti. It's a women's organization. My mother was a part of it. All the women of Tezpur were a part of it. We were put in this nursery and it was a very bewildering experience I would say. There was no such thing as Tiffin. [lunch pack]. We would be just given soaked pulses. And I had this teacher called Hemalata Baruah whom I did not like because she seemed very strict. But later on I was okay with her. We were all together in a crowd, in a group of people and that is why I was bewildered. It was different from home where my mother would take care of me independently of anybody else.

From Tezpur I was sent to Darjeeling. I was about eight or nine. My earlier siblings were sent much earlier. They were sent in 1957 and 59 perhaps and I was sent in 1960 I also have a twin brother who was also sent early. I was sent later.

I studied in Loreto up till class VIII. I failed all the time in mathematics. One of the nuns told my father that I should be taken back as I was so bad in mathematics. Its better I do something privately as they did not think that I would pass in the subject. My mind was completely blocked when it came to Mathematics exam. I told my father that you [he] should really take me back. My father brought me to Tezpur in 1967 and I did my Matric in Assam, I passed it. I went back to Darjeeling to do my pre-university where I did well. I was, as I have already said, influenced by my friends. Then I went to Delhi to do my BA.

In the first year I did not get any hostel to stay in and also I could not get in to a college. [which has a hostel]. I was first put in a college called Jesus and Mary College for one year. I had these problems in the first year. I stayed with an aunt of mine whose name is Neera Dogra. She was the Chairperson of the Central Social Welfare Board. So first year I stayed like that with my aunt. In second year, I got through to Indraprastha College and I stayed on there till my BA third year. I also did my MA in Arts Faculty in Political Science. By that time I was quite confident; I was on my own and had my own life to lead. It was an interesting life in Delhi University. It was very nice.

Forbes: - And then you went to JNU?

Behal: - I went to JNU for MPhil, only for one reason, that is, to join the Sociology Department. By that time I was reading a lot about North east and I wanted to do an MPhil on the popular religion of Assam, which is called Vaishnavism and particularly did this thing on popular religion because it was so embedded with our culture, lifestyle, value systems, in village value systems, daily life.

Forbes: - So did you come back to do fieldwork in Assam?

Behal: - Yes, in fact I was constantly in Assam, I was hardly in Delhi. I did a lot of fieldwork then. My real fieldwork started in 1978-79 on issues of rural life. In 1975 I remember I was busy with my father because he was producing a film and I was helping him with it. Back and forth I was in Assam, doing this kind of work, a lot of village work, lot of traveling by bus.

Forbes: - You talked about discrimination, gender discrimination, disparity in economic and income terms, about the discrimination faced by tribes. What about the concern for justice and economic parity? When do you think these ideas became important to you?

Behal: - I think that was latent. I thought about it but not so seriously like the other two issues. The issue of economic disparity comes much later. I can't pinpoint to you when those thoughts came to my mind but definitely through the reading that I did in my B. A. and M. A., especially in my masters. Also, the practical work that I did in villages starting from 1974 onwards, first visit was to Arunachal Pradesh in a place called Tirap district. I started seeing what poverty meant. I started accepting that yes, this is North east. All these states were once part of Assam. So may be I was wrong in 1966 when I had seen that picture. It was a person from Assam, belonging to a certain tribe. I understood that much later and worked on it.

Forbes: - There are a number of illustrious people in your family. In your childhood, did you know about these members who were also engaged in such activities?

Behal: - To give you an example, my mother was a part of Tezpur Mahila Samiti, my aunt too. In fact I believe my grandmother started it way back in 1919. But we were never told that 'your mother is so great, your grandmother was so great'. We sort of lived with it. The actions of my parents, the world that they lived in, for example, Bhupen Hazarika used to come and stay with my parents starting from 1957 as far as I remember. I was a young child. Music was resonant in my home. My uncle was the first person to bring out the first Assamese film in 1935. A lot of people would come to our home asking for research material on my uncle. He died in 1951. My mother handled all that. However, we gave away a lot of material to the Nehru Memorial Museum in the 1980s. I was born and brought up in an atmosphere where people discussed a lot about culture, very nationalistic of course especially when the Chinese came, I was already eleven years old and I knew exactly what was happening.

My aunt with whom I stayed with in my B.A. first year was a strict disciplinarian. She was on the Committee for the Status of Women. But I did not even care about those things because I hated her in the beginning. She was so strict. I realized much later what a wonderful woman she was and we became very good friends. The people with whom I talked later were people who knew her well. But she never talked to me about it. I think she thought I was only a girl who listened to pop music all the time. I was also like that because I loved music so much.

Forbes: - When you were completing your post graduation, your MPhil, was it then that you first started working with Vina Mazumdar in Delhi?

Behal: - It started with my doing this very simple kind of ethnographic work. I was so interested in village studies, norms of village society. I saw this very small ad of something called CWDS. I do not know if the phone number or address was there. But I went to meet Vina Mazumdar. I told her I do ethnography. But she said, 'Sorry we work a lot on women.' But being what she is, she started talking about ethnography, politics. She gave me time. I was very new to all this. She said, 'Since you are from Assam I will let you know if anything comes up.' And sure enough, in some weeks, a person from office came with a chit from Vina. It was written, 'Will you be willing to meet us immediately.' So I went immediately and she said, 'There is a study on the women's co-operatives all over India and nobody is willing to go to Assam. Will you go?' I said, 'Of course I will go.'

I went to Assam. I did not have much money at that time. It was 1981 or 82 I think. I went to many villages, district wise, and I realized to my horror, there was so much discrimination

against women. In a district called Kamrup, men were running all the cooperatives in the name of women. The women were used as weavers and labourers and the worst kind of pay was given to them. Then I went to Darang district and because there was some kind of assimilation between the Bodos and the Assamese, the women were on their own. And the amount that they got for a handmade towel was much more than what these Kamrup people were paying. It was a sort of self-discovery to see how the adult world of rural enterprise exploits women. It was my first exposure. When I came back and gave my report, I was working short term for Vinadi and I was highly influenced by her. When she talked, I just learned. Along with the talking there were cigarettes. In fact in 1974 I had gone to Arunachal - the first ever fieldwork I did with my cousin Romy Borooah. She was working with the Wangchus of Tirap district. She asked, 'Ben will you come with me? I need to go to NEFA.' NEFA was just getting into being called Arunachal. When we had gone there we had to take permission from the Deputy Commissioner (DC) at Tirap.

When we went there the *darwan* got us in. We were waiting for the DC and he was forty-five minutes late. Suddenly he came and had a very stern look. Then he smiled, looked at us and said, 'Oh! You people are different I think.' I said, 'What do you mean?' He said two ladies came few days back, smoking cigarettes and telling me how badly discriminated the women are. That was the time I realized they were Vina Mazumdar and Lotika Sarkar who were doing this wonderful research for a book called Towards Equality. And this horrible man was talking to me about them. At that time I did not know Vina at all. But that was very amusing and wrote about this also.

I learnt so much from CWDS. I was not a permanent fixture but always a short term person. May be it was because of the salary. If you are permanent, you earn more. But I did not even care. I contributed to their very important research on family relations in India and I did a lot of book reviews. I learnt so much. A sociological conference was going on when I met a lot of friends from America. I met a lot of women I had read about. It was an interesting time in Delhi and I thank myself for being there. I got exposed to issues of feminism. I know if I was in Assam I would not have got that exposure. While Assam gave me the field experience and also the flexibility to move around because of my liberal parents, I got a lot of intellectual and ideological inputs from Delhi.

Forbes: - So while you were being acquainted with feminism in Delhi, I think the other thing that you were doing was bringing Delhi feminists to the North east and North east to the Delhi feminists. Were you not the first person to do research and bring it to this picture of the nation?

Behal: - I can't give you a date or time but I always felt that North east has to be highlighted. It was all with good will. I was never aggressive about it and I was not angry that women's issues of the North east were not exposed to the larger Indian women's movement. But whenever there were lectures given on the Indian Women's Movement and there was a complete absence of the Seven States, I would say, 'What about the Seven States? There are indigenous movements happening there but they do not feature in the larger women's movement.' But I think that was much later in early 1990s. Of course, before that in the mid-1980s, people like Ela Bhatt, Vina Mazumdar had gone to Assam. Ela Bhatt was doing a wonderful study on the self-employed women of India. I met her through CWDS and I liked her. She had asked me, 'If you are from Assam, can you say something about it?' and I said, 'Of course.' I wrote a paper for her and it was featured not as a paper but as extracts in her big book on Assam. It was one of the first efforts that mentioned Assam.

When they came to Assam, they realized that women are quite very mobile. We are still a patriarchal society but as far as discrimination is concerned it was not found so overtly like it was found in Bihar. We did not have purdah system, did not have a religion that is so strict and caste-ridden.

Forbes: - When did you first begin to do research outside Assam?

Behal: - My first research was in NEFA, although I was there for a few weeks in 1974. It was the first exposure to fieldwork. In 1978 I went to a place called Zero in Arunachal Pradesh for a few days. I was reading and at the same time also visiting villages. I got used to traveling in buses and dropping off through a paddy field and going to villages. I started working in 1980s about Mahila Samitis of Assam, was researching. I do not remember whether I did it for Vina Mazumdar or on my own because I wrote an independent paper on it. I think it was my own enquiry into why were there 5000 rural Mahila Samitis in Assam, how do they function? I learnt a lot through those travels and I became a great traveler. Lot of people got to know me. I was also young. People told me, 'You are always cycling around, asking questions. When are you going to do something about us?' I realized that you do all these kinds of research and write about these things, but if I want to bring change I must work with them. I left CWDS and joined the Tezpur Women's Organization, from where I was doing my nursery. I learnt a lot from CWDS and I wrote a proposal to an organization called Oxfam America. I was able to get some money for Tezpur Mahila Samiti and they got a shock of their life because they had never handled money of this kind before, two lakhs and ninety thousand rupees. There was a huge celebration. All these years when they would talk about money in their Annual meetings, it would be around 700 rupees a year for purchase of carbon copies to make 30 copies of so and so primary Mahila Samiti and for post. I remember when Ela Bhatt and people came; they spent a little more than that because they had to feed the gang. All these things made me get the money and I started working on the field. That was a very satisfying experience.

In the meantime I also got married to Rana. But I must say I did not find any difference between my single and married life. Both of us worked independently. If I had told him I have to leave for three months to Assam, he would just say go and sometimes would join me. It was a very wonderful life that way of course. Children were born in 1979 and the other one was born in 1984. Rana looked after them and there was also a young person called Renu who looked after my children. It was because of them that I was able to excel in my fieldwork and discover many things which I was able to absorb and work on. Parallely, many things happened. Because I was young I was running to the Home Ministry of Assam to get FCRA for Tezpur Mahila Samiti. I was running pillar to post for proposals, to meet more women in the villages. I was doing so many things that now when I look back, I feel guilty of not being with my children.

Forbes: - Rana also did his Ph. D research from Assam, didn't he? He also visited rural areas. Could you talk about it?

Behal: - Yes, well we got married in 1977 and we had this great plan that we both are going to work. We were young – I was 25, he was 27 – and we will do it. He brought his motorcycle to Guwahati station and we got married. We just got rid of our marriage finery and were back in our jeans. The two of us traveled all over Assam. I did a bit of my fieldwork and he went to a place called Tocklai and he did research on tea. He was working on labour and it was a very wonderful experience because we were very young and we went to every home,

discovered new things. We went to relatives and everyone also welcomed us as we were newly married.

Forbes: - You both shared this interest in the history and culture of Assam.

Behal: - I helped him a lot also in Tocklai because at that time there were no photocopy machines. So he gave me a lot of stuff to copy. That's the only time I helped him. Otherwise he has always been very independent and he has always left me alone to do my work also.

Forbes: - Now when did you first begin your work in Nagaland because that involved a new kind of travel and a new state?

Behal: - I did it for the sake of experience and also to get some more money because I was not working at all. I joined the Canadian CIDA as a Gender Equity Advisor for two years, from 1992 to 1994. I left the Canadian Embassy because I applied for a fellowship called the McArthur Fellowship. I was very lucky to be awarded that fellowship because I wanted to work in Nagaland. And how did I get into Nagaland? It was through the Canadian Embassy that I visited Nagaland because the Canadians at that time were going to partner the Nagaland government in a huge environmental program called the NEPED. I went to Nagaland as the gender advisor and I said to myself, this is the place where I have to do some work because you could see the potentials of women's mobility. This is a society where half the battle is won. Women don't suffer from purdah, they are working hard but I could see that they did not have that decision making power.

When this McArthur Fellowship came, I took a subject of studying the reproductive health status of the Naga women. It was a soft subject for the Nagas. The Fellowship was just for two years. I had a secret agenda that once I am able to mobilize these groups, they can become strong like the Assamese organizations. But I was wrong. They had already formed into organizations.

What I did was in 13 months I was able to cover all the seven districts of Nagaland at that time in 1995. I visited two villages of each district. Every time I visited these villages, I would first go to the church, show my face to everybody and say, 'I would like you people to decide if two women can come and work with me.' When the Village Council or women's groups would send the women with me, they would say, 'Oh! You were there yesterday in the church.' The acceptance was very high. I think I was also accepted because I spoke in a language called Nagamese. It's like Assamese you could say. That's how the story began. Every village that I went to what struck me most was the militancy that was taking place. This was in 1995-96.

Forbes: - How did you travel?

Behal: - I went by bus from a place called Dimapur into Nagaland and in the first two months I went by bus everywhere. Then I met some government people and I showed my interest that I can drive and handle a vehicle alone. 'I will pay for the diesel and I will pay for the upkeep of the car. You give me your vehicle.' Some government people gave me their vehicle and I am grateful to them. They lent it to me. Sometimes they would send their drivers who were very useless as half the time they were chewing paan and drinking. Sometimes I would give the vehicle back and stay for two weeks in a village. I spent a lot of time and I said to myself this is the last research I am going to do because I was already in my 40s. It was an exhilarating experience and conflict really beat me down. When you go

from Kohima, you would see these army boys on top of trees with their guns pointing at you. There was an uncanny silence. There would hardly be anyone on the roads, just one or two men with his basket full of things. I said to myself what an unlucky, unfortunate state this is. The shops would close at 2:30 – 3:00 even before the sun sets. Any time there can be an outburst, a gun shot and you can get killed in the cross firing. I was very, very careful not to talk about this during my research because I knew that the moment I talked about it, any group from the militants would misinterpret me as a person who is trying to poke her nose in and on the government side; also they would think that I am trying to do some politics. But I started studying about the economic disparity that people have there. Fortunately, I got another year's extension of the Fellowship and that really consolidated my position with North East Network because it came up by us in 1995.

Forbes: - So that's the formation of NEN?

Behal: - NEN has a different history because through the Tezpur Mahila Samiti we were able to get a lot of women for Beijing Conference. It was the first time ever that we sent so many women from North east. It was such an achievement for us.

Forbes: - Who is the 'we' of NEN?

Behal: - Well I had talked to a friend called Dr. Roshmi Goswami. She is well known. By 1995 we founded this organization. She became the Director and I was the Working Chairperson. We had a set of elderly women who formed a governing body and one man called Achintya Baruah who is a friend a mine. I asked him to be a part of NEN. We need businessmen also to help us get us across to Nagaland, Mizoram. When NEN came up, Roshmi had a chance to go to Malaysia and get very well trained by IWRAW Asia Pacific on this whole issue of CEDAW. So the approach she came up with after having this training through NEN was on Human Rights for women whereas the approach that I took was on economic development of women thanks to Vina. The combination of our work was very healthy.

Forbes: - What exactly did you do in the third year?

Behal: - I did two things. I was able to decide on the village that I would take up – Chizami in Phek district. The second thing was that from my McArthur friends, I invited one of the fellows, Abhijit Das. He joined me in Nagaland and did three trainings with the women. This was in 1997-98. At the same time we were able to bring out a centre in Nagaland called the Chizami Women's Health Centre and it was a first of its kind. We put it under the banner of NEN. I just could not keep working alone. McArthur also gave me some money to set up the office in Guwahati. We had three branches – Nagaland, Meghalaya and Assam.

Forbes: - Was the Chizami Women's Health Centre the first one or were there many health centers at that time?

Behal: - I don't know how to answer this question because within the church there were lots of women's units. There were also Women's Societies. One of their main objectives is to see that health is sustained in the sense that health care should be followed by people. They also fought alcoholism and strived for a good moral life. What they did was health camps. Having health camps mean serving the men and women for five hours a day and that's it. But telling them about their rights, to look after their reproductive health – all that was very different. There was also a pastor who looked after women's health. So I am not sure if we were one of the first to bring out a women's health centre.



Forbes: - How did you branch out from health issues to environmental issues, issues of violence against women, issues of women's rights, etc.?

Behal: - I think that's the problem with us. Many organizations focus on one issue and they are doing well with it. But we were so over enthusiastic that we branched out to many things. In all the branches, I must say we worked differently. I was convinced personally after traveling to so many places that you have to disengage young people from militancy. And to do that, you cannot only conduct sermons like the priests do in the church. You cannot give lectures about conflict resolution all the time. What we did was that we got engaged in environmental, performing arts, football issues. Two young resource people came to Chizami and gave their idea on football, Salsa, folklore, poetry, wildlife conservation, etc..... Naga people eat almost all animals. Some years have passed and I can confidently say that the people who got inputs from our young resource persons have developed a love for life, different approach to life and have started talking. It is very important to talk. If you are just being sermoned about and not into any kind of debate, it can be very regressive. I admire Nagaland for their community cohesiveness. These are lessons that rest of India has to learn. Let me give you two examples. Boys don't tease girls because they grow up together, work together. Secondly, in the month of June, when you sow crops, whether the man is an IAS officer or a driver, he has to leave his job for 15 days and help his family work on the field. In November they have to do the same for the harvest. Even militants have said that 'The village is the primary point of our life.' We used some of the traditional practices and mixed it with more modern and professional ways of learning. The combination has been very good. Now being a much older person, I don't engage in this all the time. I started it but these girls are working independently and I get informed about what is happening. It won't be fair to take all the credit.

Forbes: - When you were traveling, these were troubled times not only for Nagaland but also for Assam. I wonder if you could comment on your own safety issues. Did you ever feel that you were in danger either from the army or militants?

Behal: - It was so funny you know in Assam every time a *bandh* would be announced by the Bodos it would be for 1000 hours. If you had to go through the Bodo area I would refuse to go because they would stop you – finished. So don't look for trouble. In Assam if the army caught you, then I would speak in Hindi and say "I have brothers in the army." And so I would get friendly with them. If it was the Assamese police, I would say I am from the Tezpur Mahila Samiti. I would never say NEN because I worked in Tezpur Mahila Samiti as a project coordinator for three years. They would say, 'Ok baideo jabo pare.' (Ok sister, you can go). The army would ask, 'Apka bhai kaunse regiment me hai?' (Which Regiment does you brother belong to)? And in Nagaland I was confronted just twice by the undergrounds. It was a very polite conversation and I can't tell you how confident I was. I said this is the work I am doing. One of them asked me what my purpose is. I said the purpose is to enhance the status of women because they work very hard and must be recognized for it. This can only happen if you work with them and their voices are raised in the national platform. I am sure they must have found out about the work that I was doing and I also had a lot of community support because I was very transparent with the way I stayed there, the way I spent money. I never feared. Even now, Last year boys always stopping me on the road but you can make sense. May be also because I am a woman and much older that they don't behave so badly anymore.

Forbes: - At one point wasn't your daughter in danger?

Behal: - Yes but that was not militancy. There was only one instance when she was about 20 may be, about seven years back. She was in Guwahati. I had sent her to a shop to get something. The police was chasing some militants and they pulled her aside and told her not to be there at that moment. That was it. I have never experienced it but she did, without doing any developmental work (laughter) But it was nothing really.

Forbes: - I know that you work with a community centre that focuses on much more than health. Could you talk about how it came about, even the idea for it and how local people have played a role in its development?

Behal: - It started with the McArthur Fellowship and I had to keep a promise. If you are going to train these women, you have to give way to more opportunities and choices so that they can make their own decisions because they don't know what to do next. NEN was very much at the helm by the time McArthur finished. We were doing a project through Australians, Government of India. The CWDS had some Peasant Conference in 1995. We finally finished our projects and I went to the community with my young colleagues. I said to the community, 'We are finishing our projects' but I never saw it as a project. This has been a new learning for me.' We would like to get some land where we can have a centre for positive thinking, away from drugs, smoking, etc. And I really meant it – for performing arts, weaving handloom, etc. the community discussed there and then and said, 'We will let you know within a month.' By 2004 they were able to decide on a piece of land and a man called Lohe decided to give his fallow land to us. It was nothing but a precipice.

What I did was I got hold of a very young friend at that time, an architect who was 28 years old, and I told her, 'Vrinda we have this piece of land. Do you think we can do it?' She asked, 'What kind of land?' and I said, 'It's a precipice. You do what you have to.' She came in. I said, 'Whatever you do please involve these boys and girls so that they also learn.' In the meantime in the committee of the local people, one was a treasurer, one was an engineer and we had seven to eight people looking after the thing. We built this huge centre. The architect was Vrinda Makwana. When it came up, we were disturbed by 30 militants who came up and asked, 'Is this of the government of India?' These women got up and said, 'No it is being built by a woman and we are also owners of it.' These boys said, 'Fine .... we did not know that women could do such good work.' It came up like that and is called the NEN Resource Centre. We have involved a lot of young people with wildlife conservation, music and dance. The place is also used by church or youth groups because it's a large centre and they pay for it and stay. That's like an income for us because we always hire people to do cooking and cleaning when people come. A lot of discussion has taken place in the conference hall.

We are able to manage human rights, economic development, environmental issues I think because of the situation. A year before last year there was no rain in Chizami. As a result there was no rice and maize was being eaten by the Nagas. And at that time the Deccan Development Society had come to us to talk about millets as an alternative grain to rice. We studied about it and the women had gone to a place called Pastapur. They said, 'We have to do something.' They not only learnt about millets but also did a PRA diagram to study the cost effectiveness of a plant, the nutritional value, etc. I feel very proud because these are things which I never learnt but that these women were able to learn it even if they were not so literate - is a great thing. I really respect such organizations, not just DDS, who have such fantastic teaching methods so that even people who are not so educated can learn.

Now we are going to start a millet resource centre so that we can also challenge the ecological imbalance that is taking place. We are overwhelmed with work but we are trying to fill up the gaps in the situation. Maybe we are not being so organized. My colleague Seno says. 'You know Ben, our whole vision of NEN is doing this and that but we do not even address it.' I say I don't care if it's in the vision. If people starve, you can address it as food security but you will also have to address it as a human right.

Forbes: - So you are suggesting that this interview ends before we go on and on. But what I wanted to ask you was whether there is one project that you are most proud of?

Behal: - I am really proud that we have been able to open our crisis centre in the middle of a government civil hospital in Shillong of Meghalaya. We have opened it because despite of being a matrilineal society, abuse of women is so high. A lot of women come to get treatment at night because they are being abused. We got influenced by Dilasa, an organization in the Bombay Municipal Hospital and they have trained our girls. We were able to set up the centre because of their support and is called lohlynti. We opened it day before yesterday only.

The other achievement is that we work with the police both in Assam and Meghalaya. It started with training the police in their training centre. At that time, Sanhita, a Kolkata organization helped us. We have brought out a handbook of phone numbers for women who are in distress. In a holistic way, I would look at Nagaland as an achievement because conceptually, practically we have been able to do a lot of work. It's very visible now. Thanks to Seno Tsuhah, who is the first person who wrote to me, 'I liked your training so much, I am a school teacher and I have given bits of your training to school children.' I was wondering what she was doing. A woman of imagination. And when I met her I said, 'Will you work with me?' and she did not say no because she is very polite. But she said, 'I will see.' I discovered her during my fellowship and I almost wooed her. It took me three years and by the end of it she said okay. After that there was no looking back. Seno is a determined, intelligent person and she was able to steer the projects of Nagaland in a wise way and always kept in touch with the Village Council, old people because that's where harmony can take place. No men should feel threatened about the kind of work we are doing. The approach was very good because I remember this horrible lesson. It was way back in 1988 when three boys attacked me when I was driving in Tezpur and I was called a Congressi. With a Punjabi surname Behal - I was thought to be working for Rajiv Gandhi. I was almost killed for that when I was working with the Bodo women in 1998, March 25.

I said to myself what did I do wrong and I looked up other organizations. I remember PRIA, Rajesh Tandon's organization. A lot of Assamese women were going there for training. It was written there – if you have to do fieldwork you better meet with the leader and be very transparent. That's what I did in Nagaland. I learnt from my mistakes. I am so happy that the young generation has taken over. NEN also has a new director. She is 3-4 years old as a director. I think we are well on our way and we should have a very beautiful balance between our practical work in the villages with the conceptual level.

## CLIP II

Forbes: - I want to ask you about your views on the women's movement in India.

Behal: - Talking from the North East perspective, I feel that women of the North East never really became familiar with the women's movement at all. I for one, because I worked in

Delhi and exposed to the whole group of feminists like Vina Majumdar and very influenced by them, I could immediately figure out how strong that movement was. Along with that came these different international events which always highlighted women's issues and were very dynamic and live. Whereas in Assam, I know of women's organizations celebrating International Women's Day or something but not the way in which people in other metropolises were doing. The difference I found was that women in Assam never questioned inequalities whereas the women's movement elsewhere was questioning many things. They were trying to influence the government very, very hard to see that in the grass root level, there are women farmers. Its not that only men are farmers. And I think along with the women's movement came along quite a few policy changes. For example, the Sixth Five Year Plan brought in women's integration in development world. They started recognizing women as participants of the economy even if it was non-monetized.

So what I want to say is that from North East side we did not quite feel that we were part of the movement and in a way it's very sad because it also shows very visibly that the women's movement within India did not know much about the North east. I do not know if its their fault because nobody really from other parts of India know about North East. It's a very sad thing. I always give suggestions to people and I always say - had there been a syllabus in the school curriculum of North East histories, small as they are, even if it is about small communities, I think children in India would have known much more about the North East than they know now. I would not blame this on the women's movement but I just need to tell you that when Modi's government had killed so many women in Gujarat in 2002, I think for the first time the women's movement probably felt what this kind of killing means, how much North East women have suffered under conflict situations. They started referring to North East women and conflict situations. And as far as conflict and women's movement are concerned, I think everything is at par. There is conflict in every state of India but in the 1980s, it was different. So this is what I feel about the women's movement and some of us tried very hard to see that North east women became a part of it.

Forbes: - Well, thank you very much for the interview. It was very interesting.

Dr. Behal: - Thank you

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