

Book Review

***Making a Difference: Memoirs from the Women's Movement in India*, edited by Ritu Menon.**

*What is it about Indians that we are able to venerate female politicians and goddesses
but then treat the women we live with as less than human???*
Ravneet Jhulka — Athens Georgia. Posted on Sawnet, Oct 2011.

It is an exceptional educated upper caste Indian woman who will uphold other woman's rights and help other women fight the cultural assumption that women are the lesser mortals whose status derives from her male kin. And it is a truly exceptional woman who will defend or assist rural, lower caste, tribal women.

Twenty memoirs of such exceptional Indian women who have fought for women's rights for years — doggedly, persistently, deeply valuing the creative powers of women — are presented in *Making a Difference: Memoirs from the Women's Movement in India*. A landmark event in feminist publishing, this collection of essays presents the lives of some Indian feminists who have worked across class and caste. These intrepid women describe how they came to feminism, and what it has cost them over the years.

Each woman who speaks from this collection seems to have arrived at feminism and activism through some shock or wakening, “an experience,” editor Ritu Menon says, “of discrimination in girlhood or adolescence, dimly understood then, that suddenly fell into place as unfairly and humiliatingly gendered...” Some mention Germaine Greer, Betty Friedan, Marx, Engels and other Western writers as inspiration, but lawyer Indira Jaisingh says her expectation of gender equality came from not having role models. For some, activism led to feminism when trying to alleviate the effects of state terrorism on women during India's Emergency of 1974, and the state-sponsored Anti-Sikh pogrom of 1984.

Norma Alvarez from Goa describes her work as “a humbling experience for someone like myself who did not find herself in similar circumstances and has never known such adversity.” But without her and Indira Jaisingh's work, how would domestic violence legislation in India have come about in 2005? In fresh and poignant prose, ecologist and seedbank founder Vandana Shiva's describes her emotional connection to the Chipko (tree-hugger) movement before the 70s, then her intellectual shift from quarks to the quality of farmer's lives today. Nalini Nayak, founder member of the International Collective in Support of Fish Workers in Kerala says, “although it took us a while (we kept distinguishing ourselves from liberal feminists), we finally became quite unapologetic about saying “yes, we are feminist.”

Ah, the F-word, the radical idea that a woman is a full human being who can think and act for herself, who deserves payment and takes responsibility for her work. These women wear the label of feminism with pride.

Several memoirs acknowledge the feminist songs and books of Kamla Bhasin, used as inspiration each day at the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) and other non-government organizations (NGOs). Bhasin says feminism has also extracted a huge price, and

that it is by no means an easy ism to live with. “It has challenged me at every step and in every aspect of my life, because it is the only-ism that enters into our families, our bedrooms and our most intimate relationships; and the questions of equations, practices and traditions. It has turned the PERSONAL into the POLITICAL.” Each essay deepens the impact of Bhasin's statement.

Devaki Jain, author most recently of *Women, Development and the UN: a 60 year quest for Equality and Justice* (2005), writes this beautiful and impassioned passage: “For she [woman] is everywhere...she crowds the spaces of the poor, the deprived and those who lose livelihoods first, in any crisis. Her daughters or mother surrogates are sold for survival — figures on maternal mortality blow the mind. She crowds the demonstrations for justice. She easily enters into collective presence, be it protests by waste pickers or political rallies. She is the face used by the publicity for programs... or on the flip side, to show starvation, to illustrate the grief of bereavement, to parade the outcome of calamities like war or terror attacks — she is the widow at home. Yet as the first person in the value chain of production and the principal sustainer of households, especially of the poor, she holds up much of the sky of economic success...”

Funny moments happen when women begin fighting for other women, and Ruth Vanita, (cofounder of *Manushi magazine* with Madhu Kishwar in 1979) tells about the time she impulsively used the paint she intended for slogan painting, to blacken a violent husband's face! Nirmala Banerjee, best known as a research economist at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, describes her work to quantify and include women's labor in national statistics, but ends with the observation that the Indian family rests on “the imperatives for women of marriage, monogamy and unstinting surrender of labor in the family's interest.” Bina Agarwal says, “We were so busy confronting patriarchy in men that we failed to confront it in ourselves.” Elsewhere, the memoirs mention present-day challenges from regressive religion-inspired women.

Pamela Philipose, Director of Women's Feature Service in New Delhi, describes the shift from the renaissance of the eighties to the nineties, “...there also lurked a suspicion that for the ruling elite and those they patronized, the sudden empathy was just a charade, an exercise in imagebuilding. There was also the fear of co-option, the robbing of economy and an ultimate silencing.” If you have attended art and dance shows in the capital that claim to empower women by presenting them as stylized clones or Bollywood-style fodder for the male gaze, you will feel the truth of her words.

Saheli, an organization that led the campaign that resulted in decriminalizing same-sex relations in India in 2004, contributes a memoir written in the collective ‘we.’ An interesting stylistic statement, this is also an abdication, as if no one is willing to take responsibility (positive or negative) for the actions of the women who have comprised it over the years. For an agency that fights for women's agency, this strains trust in the writers. Nevertheless, we cannot fail to be stirred by Saheli's courageous and admirable work.

These memoirs of women now in their 50s and 60s show that we inherit a war against women that continues every day; that both men and women have been and are its perpetrators; that social problems caused by women's devaluation are burgeoning. Even that longtime feminist publisher

and editor of this collection Ritu Menon says, “Sadly, not much seems to have changed for women in South Asia over the last 25 years.”

But the work of these twenty women has made it impossible for those who touched their lives to go back to that mental state before feminism that considers inequality natural or just the way Indian culture is. They and women like them, are the goddesses to whom we should bow in thanks and praise. Their example shows that acceptance achieves little, and that progress for women comes from insisting and demanding that we and other women — indeed all humans — be treated with respect and our labor valued.

May there be many sequels to this book.

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